



BROKEN ROAD
ROMANCE

BROKEN KNIGHT

AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR

LYNDA COX

Brokken Knight

Brokken Road Romances

Book 1

Lynda Cox

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Any discrepancies in the timeline between *Brokken Knight* and the other novels in *The Brokken Road* series are entirely my doing.

Working with several other authors and attempting to keep an unbroken timeline for when characters arrived in our fictional little town in Texas proved to be a challenge. In a few places, that timeline needed to be twisted a bit.

There are also minor characters in this series who appear in several of the stories. As with the timeline, there may be discrepancies in how those minor characters are portrayed from book to book.

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Dedication

Brokken Knight is dedicated to Jacque and Jan. Our brain-storming session on the way to Jackson, MS, gave life and form to Mathew and Abigail. Thank you!

I also dedicate *Brokken Knight* to one of my beloved collies —“Dixie”(American Kennel Club Champion Wych’s Where Honor Lies). *Pro aris et focis*.

April 1867

Mathew Knight folded a tersely worded telegram and slipped it into an envelope containing a small advertisement torn from *The Hawkinsville Daily Ledger* and two, single-paged letters—the only other communication he'd had with one Abigail Bailey. Hampered as he was by his useless left arm, returning the envelop to the inside pocket of his threadbare frock coat proved to be the greater task.

"Where you headed?" Boredom dripped from each syllable of the ticket agent's question.

He should just walk away. What kind of man accepted a train ticket from a woman he'd never met to travel to some backwater town in Texas as a mail order groom? No man in his right mind. But, then he wasn't sure he'd been in his right mind since a place called Camp Douglas in Illinois had made him question his very humanity.

"Mister, you want a ticket to somewhere or not? You hear me, mister?"

He heard the ticket agent. He made sure his right ear was turned to the man so he could hear him. Maybe a backwater town in Texas was the better place. Maybe there, he could forget who he was and, if the Almighty was generous, everything he failed to do. Mathew drew a deep breath, took a step closer to the ticketing window, and said, "I'm Mathew Knight. I was sent a telegram informing me there is a ticket here in my name for travel to Brokken, Texas."

The agent puzzled and then glanced at the filing cabinet on the other side of the small room. He turned around, walked to the cabinet, and picked up a rectangle of paper. After a cursory glance at the page, he returned to the window. The ticket was shoved across the counter to Mathew. "Train's running on time. It'll arrive at the station at half past the hour. It'll pull out at a quarter till."

Mathew glanced over his shoulder at the large clock on the wall. It wasn't the first time he'd been hungry. He'd survive.

His gaze shifted down to the small boy clutching the hem of his frock coat in quiet desperation. Dark brown eyes peered at him, set in a face too pale and much too thin. The tick tock of the wall clock marked his conscience.

He wouldn't ask a four-year-old to go hungry. Not after promising the child he would never be hungry again.

"Is there someplace close I can get a meal to take on the train for him?" He tilted his head down to the boy.

The agent leaned over the counter, peering at the boy. "You've

only got one ticket. The boy can't ride with you."

"He can sit on my lap."

"Can't do that. He's got to have a ticket." The agent plopped down in the chair behind the window, as if that settled the matter.

The clock counted the seconds, each tick-tock louder than the last, until they sounded as loud as gunfire.

"I'm not leaving my son." The sense of desperation he'd felt for the last four years grew, tightened around his chest and constricted his throat. "How much is a ticket for him?"

"Same price as yours."

Mathew glanced down at the thick card in his hand. His throat seized, choking him. It was nearly every penny he had. If they didn't eat for three days... A distant whistle drowned out the steady rhythm of the clock. "Give me a ticket for the boy."

"It isn't in that Rebel script, is it? Can't take that." The man jerked his thumb over his shoulder at a hand-printed sign proclaiming only federally backed certificates or gold would be accepted. He then adjusted his glasses and scribbled on a piece of a paper in time with the sudden tapping of the telegraph.

Mathew shook his head. Confederate money was as worthless as his left arm, though he did have a five-dollar note tucked into the depths of his tattered and almost empty haversack. Why he continued to keep it, he didn't know. It wasn't as if it would ever be worth anything again. He pushed what Union backed money he had across the counter.

The agent held the "horse-blanket" up to the light streaming in the window and subjected the bill to intense scrutiny. Seemingly satisfied the money wasn't counterfeit, he slid a ticket and a few coins change along the counter to Mathew.

"Half a block down, there's a widow woman who sells fruit and bread. This time of year, there's not much fruit, but she always has sweet-breads and jams. She's also got a real soft spot for the little ones." The ticketing agent gestured out the door, toward the street. He stood and added, "Her strawberry jam is the best. Almost as good as my mother's. I can hold the train for an additional five minutes so you can get him something, if you hurry."

Mathew hefted the child onto his hip and walked as quickly as he could down the street.

The widow woman was right where the agent said she would be. Tight curls in varying shades of grey escaped the brightly colored scarf tied securely around her head. Her calico dress, though often patched, was clean. Her dark face split with a wide smile and her darker eyes crinkled when Mathew stopped at the table covered with her wares.

"He's a righ' han'some little one, massah."

“I’m no one’s master. Never was.” Mathew gestured at a loaf of what appeared to be freshly baked bread. “How much for a loaf and some of your strawberry jam?”

She named her price. Mathew looked at the few coins in his palm then dropped them into the depths of his pocket. He turned away with a mumbled, “Thank you.”

The train rumbled into the station, smokestack belching black smoke. He was much too aware of the small child’s longing gaze at the near veritable feast the woman was selling.

“Hungry,” the little boy whispered in Mathew’s right ear.

“I know, Ethan. I’ll figure something out.”

“Mistah, wait.”

Mathew looked over his shoulder. The widow held out a loaf of bread and a small jar of preserves. Ethan held his hands out for the bread, straining to reach the loaf. Mathew shook his head. “I can’t. I don’t have enough money.”

An undefined sadness softened her smile. “I seen too many young ‘uns go hungry. I’s never gonna let it happen to any more if I can feed ‘em. I ain’t gonna miss it, and he shore will.”

He swallowed what little was left of his pride when she put the bread in Ethan’s outstretched hands. Mathew took the small jar from her and dropped it into his haversack, then pried the loaf from Ethan’s hands and secured it in the currently less than empty sack. “I appreciate this. Thank you.”

Her smile softened further. “You git on out of here now, before I try to give you another loaf and some o’ my rhubarb jam.”

For the first time in a long time, Mathew felt a smile cross his face. “Yes, ma’am.”

He was almost to the station when four large men, all of them as dark as the widow woman, stepped out of a narrow, heavily shaded side street, blocking his route. Mud splattered their blue uniforms and caked their brogans. The stench of alcohol clung to them as thick as pine tar. They stood shoulder to shoulder on the boardwalk. Several people turned around or stepped into the street, forced to navigate the clinging, heavy, sticky Georgia clay to avoid the uniformed men.

Mathew’s stomach clenched into icy knots, but he kept walking. The ticketing agent could only hold the train for so long, and the boardwalk was the fastest route back to the station.

Ethan buried his face against his chest. A shiver raced over the child and his shallow, rapid breaths hissed against Mathew’s frock coat.

Mathew halted when he could advance no farther. He was much too aware of the averted gazes from those walking past in the street. “Let me pass.”

The only one of them who wore any rank, two chevrons on his upper sleeves, elbowed one of his compatriots. "Still thinking they's runnin' things."

The laughter accompanying that comment held an ugly note. Ethan's arms tightened around his neck, and he doubted the child could press his face any more tightly against his chest. The child's shivering became deep, convulsive shuddering.

"Let me pass, Corporal." Mathew lowered his sight to a button on the man's shell jacket to hide his sudden, seething rage for those responsible for Ethan's terror. "Please."

Before any of the men could jeer at him further, Mathew was nudged to a side by a whirlwind in faded, patched calico. The widow shoved the man who spoke first, her palms flat against his broad chest. "You ain't right. Dress you up, let you think you're somethin' important, and all you do is prove to these people you ain't got the brains the good Lord gave a goose."

"Now, Momma, we was—"

"Don' you 'Now, Momma' me, Thomas White, actin' the fool an' all. Y'all get outa this man's way." She glanced over her shoulder at Mathew and reached into a pocket on her dress and extended a handful of coins to him. "You forgot to git your change."

Mathew looked from the four men, to the small woman holding them at bay, to the money she held out to him. Even though every hair stood on the back of his neck, he managed to shake his head and say, "No, ma'am, I didn't forget it. It's—"

"I ain't takin' your charity." She cut him off, her expression tightening as she slanted her gaze to the four men and then to Mathew. "Take your change and git."

He quickly weighed his options. He could take the money, accepting *her* charity or he could refuse and tell her she was mistaken, he wasn't owed any change. Either way was fraught with pitfalls. If he took the change, he guaranteed Ethan would have a full belly for the next several days. But, that meant, he would choke on his own pride. And, she called her son a fool? He was the bigger fool, by far, for refusing.

Mathew scooped the change from her palm and deposited it in his pocket with the nine cents he had left after purchasing Ethan's ticket. "Thank you, ma'am."

Without even acknowledging him, she waved both her hands at the four men, as if she was shooing flies from a buttermilk pie. "Git outa the man's way. A field hand got better manners than the lot of you."

They parted like the Red Sea before Moses. Mathew gulped in a deep breath and walked through them, while holding Ethan tightly to

his chest. Ethan's fearful trembling matched the frantic pace of his own heart.

The widow continued to rail at the four men until he could no longer hear her when he entered the train station. He hefted Ethan higher onto his hip and jogged out to the train.

He settled Ethan on a bench mid-car, next to the window on the side opposite from the station and then sat alongside the child. Ethan scooted to the edge of the seat, and looked up at him, his dark eyes wide. "I bad?"

"No, Ethan, you're not." How had the child reached the conclusion he had misbehaved?

"Lady yell." The boy ducked his head, hunching into himself, as if he expected a sharp rebuke, or worse, a physical correction.

Ethan's lack of language skills only compounded Mathew's guilt for failing his wife and son. "She wasn't yelling at you. She was yelling at the men who blocked the boardwalk."

A loud hiss of steam, accompanied by the mournful wail of the train's whistle, signaled the train's imminent departure. Another long release of steam engaged the pistons. Mathew threw his right arm across Ethan's chest to prevent him from falling forward with the massive locomotive's forward lurch.

Ethan's reaction was instant. He flung his thin arms over his head and cowered. "I sorry."

As before, this reaction was just as unsettling as it had been the first time Mathew witnessed the child's response to any rapid gestures. Mathew turned on the seat to fully face his son. He gently pried the boy's arms off his head and tilted his face to him. "I promised you that no one would ever hit you again, didn't I?"

The boy nodded, though the distrust haunting his eyes burned through Mathew's chest hotter than the fires that had destroyed Atlanta. Only time and keeping his word would rebuild Ethan's trust.

Mathew tucked his worn frock coat tightly around his son. It might be mid-spring and it might be the deep south, but the night air filling the passenger car was chilly and damp. Lightning flickered on the far distant horizon, promising rain before dawn. Gusting cross winds moaned over the roof of the car and set the lowered flames of the gas lamps flickering. Mathew turned his attention to his fellow passengers, most of whom were sleeping.

The bench directly across the aisle from him was occupied by what he assumed to be a pair of spinsters, as neither wore a wedding band, and they shared the same last name. Sisters, they told him. The war had driven home the point that life was much too short, and they wanted to see the places their sea-faring captain father had always spoken of. He nodded politely when they told him they were off on a grand adventure to California, and he wondered if either of them knew what travel across the desert by stage could possibly entail.

A young couple with their two children occupied the front bench. They kept as much as possible to themselves and had their tickets at the ready with every stop. The smaller of their two babes was hardly more than a few weeks old. The other could walk but was unsteady on her small feet. Her father continually deflected any attempt from the child to toddle nearer to any of the other passengers. Even when Mathew assured the little girl's father it was all right for her to walk the aisle, the man had cut a frightened glance to the other passengers, dropped his gaze, and mumbled a response Mathew couldn't hear.

Watching her wobbling steps was bitter-sweet for Mathew. He had missed all of Ethan's first attempts at walking and running. With darkness, the couple's child had fallen asleep about the same time as Ethan. Mathew mused all children, no matter the color of their skin, were much alike in that aspect. Put enough food in their bellies, keep them warm, and as soon as the light faded, they drifted into slumber. Thanks to the widow's bread and strawberry jam, Ethan finally had a full belly.

The last occupant of the railroad car was the enigma for Mathew. The former cavalry officer had done nothing that Mathew could note to merit the young couple giving him such a frightened deference other than he wore a Confederate officer's great coat. He supposed that was enough. As little as two years ago, and even if they had all the proper paperwork, there would have been nothing stopping anyone from forcing the couple off the train and into chains as

runaways. The officer had boarded the train at the first stop outside of Atlanta, sat alone in the very last row, and shunned all attempts to engage him in conversation. While most of the men Mathew knew who still wore part of their Confederate uniforms did so out of sheer necessity, this one wore his great coat as if served two purposes—as a suit of armor and a badge of honor. On either side of the man's upright collar, a single gold star occasionally caught the flaring of the lamps.

Realizing he stared as he tried to unravel the mystery of the stranger, Mathew turned his attention to his son again. The weight of the boy's head on his thigh reminded him of his responsibilities. He traced the child's profile in the dimmed light. Ethan had inherited his brow, nose, and chin. The soft curls, ash-brown hair color, and brown eyes were from the boy's mother. Since he had found Ethan in an orphanage, protecting and caring for him had become his only concern.

A renewed sense of guilt bore down, nearly crushing him. Georgianna was dead because of his damned sense of honor. His need to serve in the capacity he knew best, as a doctor, killed her. Even sending her and their unborn child to her family near Atlanta hadn't protected them from the ravages of war. When Sherman began his march to the sea with the stated goal to "make Georgia howl," Mathew, along with many of the men held in Northern prisoner of war camps, felt the agony inflicted on the civilian population. He still couldn't understand how any force could wage war on defenseless women, children, and old people and claim to be civilized.

Mathew unclenched his fist, closed his eyes, and tried to force a return of a sense of calm. As if he sensed Mathew's anger, Ethan stirred but didn't wake. Mathew opened his eyes to watch his sleeping child. He brushed the shock of curls off his son's brow. He continued to stroke the soft curls in a soothing manner as he had seen Georgianna do when he'd been home on a four-day furlough. Ethan had been an infant and it was the only time he had seen his son until he found him in that hellhole deemed an orphanage.

One of the sisters stirred, Miss Eva, he thought... or was it Ava? She leaned across the aisle. "What's his name?"

"Ethan."

Both women nodded and smiled. The spinster he thought to be Ava asked, "Is that a family name?"

"It's the name his mother and I agreed upon."

"Are you taking him to his mother?"

Mathew shook his head. "No. She's dead."

The spinster covered her opened mouth with a lace-gloved hand. "I am so sorry for your loss."

He should thank her for her condolences, but the empty platitudes would mean nothing to either of them. He considered donning his hat and pulling it down low over his eyes, as the enigma in the back of the car had done, so he could avoid this utterly banal conversation. Instead, he feigned a yawn. "I apologize. It has been a rather long and tiring day."

"Of course. It must be very exhausting caring for a child by yourself. Men just aren't meant to be the sole caregivers for children." Ava reached across her sister and the aisle and patted Mathew's withered arm. "You just rest. Sister and I will stop prattling."

"The late unpleasantness took so much from so many," Eva, the more garishly dressed of the middle-aged women said, nodding in a seemingly knowing manner. He doubted if either sister had suffered the slightest deprivation at any point in their lives. While he knew precious little about the current fashions for ladies, he knew silk, satin, and taffeta when he saw it, and both she and her sister were drenched in the fabrics. Eva's pointed gaze cut to the young parents at the front of the railroad car. "That War...it took away so many brave and gallant young men and livelihoods and property..."

Mathew bristled. When he joined the Confederacy, it wasn't to fight for *property*, as the woman labeled the young family. Rather, Mathew fought against an invading army and an over-reaching, ever-growing, intrusive Federal government.

Mathew jerked his arm out from under the spinster's hand, well past the point of caring about politeness and convention. "Ma'am, I am a physician" —or *he had been, until he couldn't bear the loss of one more life at Camp Douglas*— "and I can assure you that so-called 'property' has the same intellect, emotions, and their blood is the same color as yours or mine."

Ava recoiled. Eva's jaw dropped before she recovered and snapped her mouth closed. As one, the two women huffed, puffed, and flounced on the seat, presenting a rigid profile to him. He could swear he heard the man seated alone snort with laughter. Mathew slouched as far as he could on the bench without disturbing Ethan. He rolled his head back, pulled his hat down low, and closed his eyes.



AT FIRST LIGHT, THE train arrived at a small town in Louisiana and slowed to a stop. The conductor walked through, announcing the train would be halted for thirty minutes to fully fill the water reservoirs and load the fuel car. Ethan tugged on Mathew's sleeve. "Hungry."

Though he wanted to coach Ethan's language skills, trying to engage the child when he was hungry had proved to be an exercise in futility. Mathew reached into his pocket and pulled out the change the

widow woman in Atlanta had given him. A quick mental calculation left him feeling queasy. Purchasing Ethan's ticket left him nearly penniless. Even with the generosity of the widow, if he and Abigail couldn't reach terms to this supposed marriage, he would be destitute with no manner to secure lodging for himself and Ethan. And none of that assuaged Ethan's hunger.

He picked up the child. "Let's go find something for you."

The couple with the small children remained seated, though the little girl tugged against the restraining hand her father had on her wrist. Her mother rummaged through a small carpet bag, her expression growing longer by the moment.

The twin spinsters rushed past Mathew, both pulling their voluminous skirts in as tight as the hoops would allow. With matching noses tilted upward, they flounced across the wooden platform of the small station.

"Chicken," Ethan said.

A mouth-watering aroma wafted into the early morning air from a small building next to the depot. Mathew forced himself to ease his tight hold on his son, grateful for Ethan's distracting comment. "No, I think that's bacon."

Ethan shook his head and pointed at the spinsters, repeating more firmly, "Chicken."

Even in their brightly colored finery, the women had all the mannerisms of a pair of angry, puffed up hens. Mathew struggled to keep a laugh contained, and he pulled Ethan's hand down. "It's not polite to point."

A loud metallic squeal drew Mathew's attention from the women.

The enigma from the passenger car stepped into the livestock car and emerged in short order leading a solid grey horse. The grey followed docilely behind in a manner more like a well-trained hound dog than a horse.

When the man walked closer, hampered by a slight limp, Ethan buried his face in Mathew's frock coat. Mathew acknowledged the man with nod, expecting him to walk on by.

Mathew startled when the former Confederate officer spoke. "Mister, I need a favor."

Matthew looked around and then realized the man addressed him. "What can I do for you?"

"Not sure where you're headed, and it doesn't really matter." The man held out a single gold coin. "Take this, so the boy gets enough to eat. And, get something for that couple with the babies."

"I don't want your charity, mister." Mathew shook his head, backing away. "If you want to feed that couple, why don't you get it for them?"

“You really think they’d take anything from me?” The man glanced down at his attire. “Wearing this? Maybe you don’t need charity, but that couple could use some help.”

He had a point. Mathew recognized the expression of worry on the woman’s dark face when her exploration of the carpet bag came up short on foodstuffs. He took the coin the former cavalry officer held out to him.

“Get them something to eat and use the rest for your boy as payment for your troubles.” He reached up to the horse’s head and slipped his fingers through the cheek-strap on the bridle, buckling the loosened leather.

Mathew’s breath caught in the back of his throat when he glanced at the coin and noted it was a twenty-dollar gold piece. “I can’t take this.”

“Sure you can.” The enigma tugged the leather strings holding a bedroll to the back of the saddle, then tightened the girth. He tossed the reins around the horse’s neck and put his foot into the stirrup.

“Did you fight for Jeff Davis?”

“I served in the medical corps with the Tenth Tennessee Cavalry under Longstreet.” Mathew shifted Ethan’s sagging weight. “I didn’t fight *for* Davis.”

The spinster sisters flounced back to the train, their skirts still gathered as close as possible.

“You carry yourself like most of the physicians I’ve known, but I wouldn’t have taken you to be a cavalry man.” There was neither disbelief nor accusation in the man’s voice that Mathew could hear, just a simple stating of fact.

Either the man’s hearing was preternatural, and he’d overheard Mathew’s comment the night before about being a physician, or his observational skills were beyond compare. Mathew boosted Ethan higher onto his hip and looked at the coin in his useless hand. “Why me?”

“Why not you? I heard what you told those two last night.” The former officer canted his head at the sisters, answering Mathew’s wondering of how the man had taken him for a physician. He swung into the saddle, and then shifted his weight from stirrup to stirrup to settle in. “Bet you didn’t get paid in anything other than useless Confederate script the last two years, *if* you were paid at all. Consider that partial payment of wages.”

He didn’t know anyone who had been paid for the time held in a Union prisoner of war camp. Most of the men he talked to after his parole and release hadn’t seen any pay the last few months of the war, either. The unsettling thought occurred to Mathew he was dealing with a robber of some sort. “Where did you get this?”

“Benito Juarez. He paid better than Maximillian, paid in gold, and I knew I wasn’t signing up for another losing cause.” The other man nudged his hat back a little. “It’s not stolen, if that’s what you’re wondering.”

Could a man choke on his own pride? When he checked his meager finances, had it been that obvious how dire the straits where he found himself? Mathew shoved the coin into his pocket. “If they ask, who do I tell them to thank?”

The rider looked over his shoulder. The cultured, highly educated cadence to his voice altered and the hinted at drawl deepened. “You. If you can’t do that, tell ‘em it’s compliments of Micajah Clark.”

Mathew snorted with the reference to the last man who acted as secretary of the Confederate treasury, a position Captain Clark held for less than forty-eight hours. “You’re not Clark.”

“I never said I was.” The Confederate major put his heels into the grey’s sides and rode off at a slow trot.

It wasn’t until later when he handed a loaf of bread and a large piece of cheese to the young couple for their children that Mathew realized he never did learn their benefactor’s name.

“Are you sure he’s coming?” Victoria English, *de facto* sheriff for the town of Brokken, asked. She dropped her slouch hat onto the nearly black teak wood of the bar top in the front parlor and leaned her elbows onto the bar. Her weight shifted to a side when she propped a boot on the brass footrail. Before Abigail could answer, Victoria asked, “Have you got anything cold to drink? It’s not even noon, and it’s already hotter than the hinges of hell’s doors.”

“Am I sure who is coming?” Abigail gestured to a glass pitcher on the end of the bar. Condensation slid down the glass, soaked up in the rag under the pitcher. At one time, Abigail had been mortified she and Sam had turned a former brothel into their home and Sam’s medical office, but that emotion had faded. The garish decorations no longer seemed out of place for either a home or a doctor’s clinic. The deep red and gold flocked velvet wallpaper of this room had grown on her, though she avoided looking in the floor-to-ceiling mirror that ran the length of the bar. Having the old bar as a work space to mix tinctures, bottle dried herbs, and prepare remedies was a boon. “Put it back on the rag, so the water doesn’t make a ring on the wood, please,” Abigail said.

“Dr. Knight.” Exasperation edged Victoria’s words, audible over the gurgling of the freshly made lemonade being poured into a glass. “Give me something to put my glass on. I don’t want you mad at me for ruining this *lovely* bar.”

“You know as much as I do.” Abigail tossed a small, round, crocheted mat to her. She didn’t point out it had taken her and Sam weeks to strip the old, yellowed varnish off the teak to repair the water damage before they resealed the wood. “You delivered his telegram, and I’m pretty sure you read it before you gave it to me.”

Victoria grinned all the way to her dark eyes, amusement sparkling in their depths. “Guilty. Have you seen the preparations going on out there for the street festival? There’s enough bunting to mark the whole border of the state with Louisiana.”

“I don’t think there’s that much, Vic.” Abigail unscrewed the lid on a jar, sniffing the tincture of plantain. It needed a few more days to brew. She twisted the lid down tight. “Are you going to come to the festival?”

“I might. Depends if you’re making a pecan chess pie for the cake walk. I’ll be there for the dance. I’ll be serving punch, so I have an excuse not to dance.” Victoria’s grin stretched from cheek to cheek.

There were times Abigail thought Victoria courted trouble. Her punch was always spiked. "I made two pies. One for the cake walk and one for you. Heaven knows, no one wants you waving that badge around to win my chess pie."

"Are you accusing me of using this badge for personal gains?"

The feigned injury in her friend's voice brought Abigail's laugh bubbling to the surface. "As much as you like my pie, I wouldn't be surprised if you threatened to arrest anyone who came between you and it."

Not the slightest shame entered Victoria's voice or shaded her features. "I'll have to plead guilty to that, too."

"A chess pie isn't hard to make. You could make your own." Abigail picked up the last bottle of laudanum and tilted it, hoping that somehow, miraculously, the almost empty container might have refilled itself in the past few days. "Thank heavens the train is running again. Maybe I can get more medical supplies."

"Speaking of medical supplies, Father wasn't happy that Dr. Knight insisted the two of you be married by proxy." Victoria flicked away a fly that landed on her arm.

Being friends with Victoria since the moment she and Sam had arrived in Brokken, Abigail quickly learned how to decipher and interpret her friend's manner of connecting seemingly unrelated subjects. "Hang your father. "

"Father said pretty much the same about Dr. Knight and his demand of a proxy marriage and your agreement to it. What are you going to do if you can't stand one another?"

"Well, as you explained it to me, if we both agree that it won't work, we can have the marriage annulled." Abigail sighed. "Even if we can't stand one another, I'm hoping we can all convince him to stay on as the town doctor."

"You've been doing just fine."

"Not really." The sinking sense of helplessness when Devon Peters had been hit in the head and fallen unconscious still woke Abigail in the middle of the night, drenched in cold sweats. Even though it had been months since that happened, and the child had regained consciousness within a day and appeared no worse for the wear, a sense of inadequacy continued to eat at Abigail. "We were granted a miracle with Devon."

Victoria slowly nodded her agreement. Needing to change the subject, Abigail asked, "Did any of the men who wrote here in response to all those ads strike your fancy?"

"No." Victoria shooed the persistent fly away. "If Jonathan is dead and gone, I have no intention to ever marry again. I like the sense of freedom that comes with being a widow."

She could well imagine Victoria was appreciative of that freedom. Brokken might not be the height of starched, rigid upper society by any means, but there were still some social conventions even the citizens here followed. As a widow, Victoria could ignore most of those conventions. The revelation a few weeks earlier that Jonathan had been harming her friend came as a total shock to Abigail, and she still had a hard time grasping how she missed all the signs. "Have you told your father you have no intention of ever marrying again?"

"I haven't screwed up enough courage to tell him that." Victoria slowly raised her hand, and then slapped it down on the teak bar top, killing the annoying fly. "I want to be able to counter all of his arguments, and I haven't thought all of those through. I can think of a few arguments Father will make about whether or not I should remarry."

Abigail could frame a few of Pastor Grisson's arguments, too. She threw a damp rag scrap to Victoria. "Wipe the counter off. That's disgusting."

Victoria dutifully did as ordered. "What about you? If Dr. Knight isn't your knight in shining armor, are you ever going to marry again?" She tossed the rag back to Abigail.

"I'm not looking for a knight in shining armor." Abigail took the rag between her thumb and index finger and tossed the offending fabric into a wash basket under the bar. As far as it went, it was the God's honest truth. She doubted that she would ever look at any other man as she had looked at Sam. So whatever physical attributes one Dr. Mathew Knight might possess would be a moot point for her. It was what was in a man's heart more than his looks that made for a good marriage. Victoria, of all people, should understand that. While Sam hadn't been the most attractive with his weak chin and scarecrow-like build, he had been a gentle and good man. Victoria's presumed late husband, Jonathan, had been swooned over by nearly every woman between the ages of nine and ninety in Brokken County, yet his stunning handsomeness had helped him hide a dark and ugly secret. "So long as he's a competent physician, I don't care if he's short, fat, and balding. All I want for this town is a full-time doctor. I don't have to be married to him for him to stay on as our doctor."

"Maybe, that's why he didn't send a description of himself." Victoria's chuckle held a wicked, mischievous undertone. "He is all that, with a nasty temper. To hide how bald he is, he lets his hair grow long to comb it over his head. He probably always has bad breath, too."

"Stop." Abigail gestured out the parlor door. "Don't you have to set up the targets for the shooting contests?"

"Already done." Victoria's grin filled with the mischievousness that

had been so absent whenever she had been in Jonathan's presence. "I'll bet because your doctor is short, fat, and balding, he dresses like a dandy at a fancy ball to try to hide his short-comings. You know, in the same manner some men deliberately ride a huge stallion to make up for an inadequacy elsewhere."

"Victoria!" She wasn't sure which most shocked her—Victoria's assumption that Dr. Knight hadn't included a physical description because he was as she described, or that Victoria assumed the men who chose to ride a stallion did so to prove their own manliness. "I have work to do. You know as well as I do at tomorrow's festival I'm going to be busy with upset tummies, heat prostration, skinned knees and the like. I have to get supplies ready."

"Maybe your short, fat, balding doctor with bad breath can help you when he gets here."

That was doubtful. The train didn't arrive at the station until almost five in the evening. All that would be left of the festivities then would be the dancing. "Good-bye, Victoria."

Victoria pushed off the bar and walked out of the parlor. She paused in the doorway. "If Dr. Knight isn't to your liking, Robbie is still available."

"Robbie?" Abigail heard the squeak in her voice. "Robbie Roden?"

Abigail just barely stopped herself from adding a "t" to the end of Robbie's sur name.

"Yep. Possum-face told Molly and Sophia that you and he are getting married Sunday. He told Molly to bake a special wedding cake just for the two of you and asked Sophia to keep the best room reserved for your wedding night." Victoria chuckled. "They both told him unless he paid up front, there wouldn't be a cake or a reserved room."

The instant image of the lean, lanky, under-nourished boy—no, he was a man by chronological definition—came to mind, complete with an image of Robbie's features which had lent to the less than flattering nickname of Possum-face. Abigail shook her head. Her ability to be amused by Robbie's tall-tales disappeared when those lies began to hurt others. "I'll follow your lead on not marrying again if Dr. Knight and I are not compatible."

Victoria smiled. "Good idea. I just can't see myself calling you Abigail Rodent."



THE WORST "EMERGENCY" that had needed her attention happened in the pie-eating contest when a blueberry became lodged up Alexander Jennings's nose. A handkerchief and an order to "Blow hard" resolved that problem. The festival was over and almost

everyone had gone home to get ready for the barn dance. Abigail lingered on the street, helping to put things away. The distant blast of a train whistle reached her. After not hearing a train announcing its arrival to the station for several long years, that whistle still startled her. She straightened and turned her head in the direction of the tracks.

Victoria caught her eye from across the street. After a small group of children ran between them toward the train station, the sheriff held a hand out, palm down, and pushed it toward the ground, then held both hands out and spread them far apart, indicting height and width. Abigail couldn't fully quell her grin.

A second call of the whistle did to her grin what she couldn't. Her heart sped up while her stomach twisted in tightening knots. She wiped her palms down her skirt, wicking away the beading sweat, and tried to ignore the sudden moisture dripping down her spine.

What if he wasn't on the train? Every penny she managed to keep squirreled away and hidden had been spent to purchase Dr. Knight's ticket. Thank heavens she hadn't trusted her meager savings to the bank. Had she done that, there wouldn't have been even a single red cent left after the Brokken brothers robbed the institution. In the intervening weeks since Dr. Knight had answered the advertisement in the paper near Atlanta, the thought of being left standing at the proverbial altar wasn't as disconcerting as she imagined. If he wasn't on the train, the worst that could happen was she found herself married to a man she'd never seen. Surely annulling a marriage to an absent groom wouldn't be too difficult.

As the train pulled into the station, the pointed, massive black grate on the front of the engine caught the corner of her eye, and Abigail craned her head in degrees to the train slowing. Steam hissed from the pistons, shrouding the whole locomotive in a writhing cloud. Forcing air into her lungs became a struggle.

What if he *was* on the train and decided that he couldn't stay married to her? There wasn't much Brokken could offer, if she was forced to be honest. Convincing any doctor to stay would be a hard row to hoe. Barter and trade worked well for what Abigail did, but would that suffice for him? The majority of Brokken's citizens could barely make ends meet. How would they ever be able to pay a doctor's fees?

What if she couldn't bring herself to remain married to *him*? He could be as cold as a well-digger's knee. Or as hot-headed as a struck match. He could object to having her assistance and deny how beneficial her use of native plants could be. That would be the very worst thing she could imagine. There was the real possibility he was everything Victoria had teasingly painted him. Looks weren't

everything, she knew.

Victoria broke into Abigail's rambling thoughts. "Do you want me to walk with you to the train station?"

"No." She emphasized her answer with a shake of her head. "Thank you."

"Afraid the sight of a woman wearing a badge and a gun might scare him off?"

"Yes. That's exactly what I'm afraid of. Well, all of that and the fact you're wearing trousers, too." Abigail added a smile to take the sting from her words. She brushed as much of the dust as she could from her skirt. Gathering this many people on the main street of town with the accompanying horses and wagons made the dust fly. There was no way to avoid it. A tug of her shirtwaist, a fortifying deep breath, another swipe of her palms down her skirt, and a squaring of her shoulders did precious little to boost her confidence.

The brakes on the engine screamed with the effort to halt the black behemoth. A porter swung out onto a small set of stairs on a railcar.

"Are you sure you don't want me to walk with you?" Victoria stood next to her and nudged her head in the direction of the station.

"I'm sure." She reached under the table and withdrew a covered pie. "Take this to the jail and enjoy it. I put it back just for you."

"Very clever use of my favorite pie to distract me." The sheriff took the covered dish. "You're also stalling."

Victoria was right, and she couldn't continue to delay any longer. Abigail crossed through the town square, passing the recently robbed bank and the town hall. Robbie Roden stood in the shadows of the bank, and even though Abigail couldn't swear he stared at her, the hair along the back of her neck prickled. Alexander and Aaron Jennings sat in the shade of the blacksmith shop. The bright white of a large triangular piece of fabric serving as an arm sling to support Alexander's injured shoulder shimmered in the shadows. Aaron waved at her. Alexander called, "Are you coming to the dance this evening, Miss Abby?"

"Maybe." She turned her gaze back to the station. Two middle-aged women hurried off the train, dressed in more finery and frillery than Abigail had ever seen. The gentleman who disembarked from the train couldn't possibly be Dr. Knight because a small boy stood behind him, the hem of the man's frock coat held in his small fist. Abigail swept her gaze over the man and the child while she continued to make her way onto the wooden walkway that passed as a station in Brokken.

One of the older women stepped directly in front of Abigail. "Young lady, is there a boarding house or hotel in this...town?"

Without taking her gaze from the man on the walkway, Abigail

noded and gestured over her shoulder in the general direction of the town's only hotel. "Over there. Sophia should have a room available."

With a huffing of her breath, the older woman brushed past Abigail. "How rude..."

Abigail turned in the woman's direction. "Ma'am, I'm sorry you feel I'm being rude. It's just that my—" she couldn't bring herself to call Dr. Knight her husband, though, legally, that's what he was—"my intended is supposed to be on that train."

She may as well have been talking to a wall. The woman already swept past her as if she no longer existed. Abigail's attention returned to the man and the boy.

Good heavens, he was tall and lean. A small, dark bag of some sort hung over one shoulder, while he held a slouch hat in one hand. He bent his head to the child at his side, and a curtain of dark hair fell across his face. When he straightened, he impatiently shook the hair back, and then positioned the hat on his head, tugging the bill down low over his brow, all with only one hand. The beard stubble darkening his jaw and cheeks was more than just from missing one day of shaving, though he wore a moustache and a goatee. At least he didn't have muttonchops that had been allowed to grow into his moustache.

What Abigail found odd though was he never took his left hand from the pocket of his frock coat, not even to hold the slouch hat so he could sweep the overgrown hair from his face.

His long bowtie hung limp. The crease of his trousers no longer existed, and many more wrinkles marred the fabric at his knees. Abigail reasoned there probably wasn't an area set aside on the train for passengers to freshen themselves. She looked beyond him. No one else exited the train.

Her gaze drifted back to the man. The child at his side clenched her heart. Thin, much too thin in her estimate. His little bony ankles and wrists extended well beyond the length of his trousers and shirt sleeves. Dark blond curls crowned his small head, but he hadn't lifted it and she wondered what on the walkway could be so interesting to a small boy.

She looked up and down the short wooden platform, pausing to nod in greeting at Thomas Reed, the new cook at Molly's restaurant. Reed hefted a small crate of perishables onto his shoulder and returned the nodded greeting. No one else was near the train. The heavy weight of disappointment pressed down on her. Doctor Knight had indeed decided not to come to Brokken, after all. Pastor Grisson would be the first to remind her marrying the man by proxy had not been a wise action.

"Yes, I'll find you something to eat." The gentleman strode past

her, speaking to the boy struggling to keep up. “But first, we have to find Mrs. Bailey.”

Mrs. Bailey? No one would be looking for her other than her groom.

“Dr. Knight?”

The piercing whistle of the train announcing its departure drowned her out. Abigail took a step closer to the man’s retreating back. “Dr. Knight?”

When he didn’t respond, she spoke louder, fighting to keep her backwoods accent under control. That it always emerged when she was tired or flustered made the battle more difficult. “Dr. Mathew Knight?”

He still didn’t respond. Abigail lifted her skirt and jogged down the wooden platform until she was in front of him and the child. She stepped into his path. “Are you Dr. Knight?”

He halted and met her gaze. Never had she looked into such eyes. The color wasn’t brown or blue or green. It wasn’t even black, though black flecked the deep color. The child stepped behind his leg and bent his head as far to the platform as possible. Neither spoke forcing Abigail to break the silence.

“I’m Abigail Bailey.” She inwardly groaned. Her Virginia drawl made itself well heard. Maybe he hadn’t heard over the sudden loud hissing of steam from the engine.

His brows lowered, and he shook his head, and then shot a pointed glare at the train. There was little doubt he hadn’t heard her over the noise created with the locomotive’s racket. Abigail leaned closer to him and spoke louder, repeating her introduction.

The only reaction came in the form of a quick, single, terse dip of his head.

The platform shuddered with the forward lurch of the engine. Abigail threw all caution to the wind. She touched his lower arm and then gestured to the main street of town, indicating he should follow her.

A half-smile crossed his face but didn’t reach his unusual eyes. He dipped his head in what would have been a polite acknowledgment were it not for that cool, partial smile. He then held his hand out for her to lead the way.

Abigail craned her head around the tall form to the small child trying to hide behind the man’s long legs. The child peeked out from under the hem of the man’s frock coat. She smiled at him. The boy immediately dropped his gaze.

She stepped off the wooden platform and glanced up the length of the main street. He hadn’t said he was Mathew Knight. And, if he was, why hadn’t he mentioned the child in his sparsely worded letters?

Taking him to her house wouldn't be advisable, nor acceptable, if he wasn't Dr. Knight.

The five-oh-five wasn't even out of the station, but the sound of several hammers driving nails home reached her. Three men she didn't recognize worked to make repairs to the false front of the butcher shop under the supervision of Yancy McCoury. He would be insisting on a job done correctly, as his small candy store shared a common wall with the butcher's, and as promised, he had waited until the street festival ended to begin the work.

"Is the hotel open for business?"

Abigail startled with his question. "Yes, it is."

Perhaps, the sweeping veranda of the hotel would be an acceptable place. Abigail led the way to the hotel and made her way to a seating area in a shaded corner of the wide porch. He waited for her to take a seat, and then sat in another of the wicker chairs that was at an angle to her. He lifted the boy onto his lap and immediately shoved his left hand into the pocket of his coat. Uncertain of what to say, Abigail smoothed out a non-existent wrinkle in her skirt and played with the lace that edged her sleeves.

"I apologize for what must seem to be rudeness on my part," he said, breaking the uncomfortable silence. He brushed what travel dust he could from his coat with only his right hand. "I had difficulty hearing anything with the train so close. Please forgive my appearance. The accommodations on the train were rudimentary, at best."

"I could barely hear myself over the noise." She looked from him to the child. The boy studiously kept his head bent to the floor. Returning her gaze to the man, she said, "I'm Abigail. Abigail Bailey. I assume you're Dr. Mathew Knight?"

"Yes, ma'am."

Abigail quelled the sudden urge to grin. Victoria had been completely off the mark about Dr. Knight's appearance. "You are nothing like I imagined."

She wanted to take the words back as soon as they left her tongue. Fortunately, the child circumvented any response he might have had to her outburst. The boy turned into the man's chest and tugged on the lapel of his frock coat.

Dr. Knight bent closer to him. "I'll find you something to eat, Ethan. I know you're hungry."

Where in heaven's name had she left her head? She heard him say more than five minutes ago he would find the boy something to eat. Without any warning, Abigail stood. The doctor jumped to his feet, dislodging the child. At least he had manners. She bit the inside of her cheek to keep a smile hidden. "My house is next door. If you want to

come with me, I have a loaf of freshly baked bread and some thinly sliced roast. I can make him something to eat.”

Knight hesitated. Abigail added, “Or, I can bring it here.”

“Would you object to making something for both of us?”

Abigail’s mouth fell open. How could she have been so thoughtless? She threw caution to the wind again and took his right hand into hers. “Of course not. Do you want to come with me or should I bring it here?”

He pulled his hand back quickly, and she knew she had overstepped her boundaries. She was so accustomed to taking Sam’s hand or settling hers onto his lower arm. Those days of such familiarity and intimacy were long gone.

“I think Ethan would be more comfortable indoors.” He hesitated, then added, “So would I, if that is acceptable.”

“Of course, it is.” Abigail forced another smile. “Ethan?”

“My son.” Knight bent closer to the boy and tousled the already unruly curls. “He’s a bit shy.”

“I see that.” Abigail dropped to eye level with the child. Even though Ethan wouldn’t meet her gaze, she spoke directly to him. “Ethan, I have a cherry cobbler over in my house. I think it’s still warm. A friend of mine put a big bowl of ice cream in my ice box because I couldn’t go to the social a little while ago. We need to eat that ice cream. Would you like some on your cherry cobbler?”

For the briefest of seconds, Ethan tilted his head up. His dark eyes widened, and he licked his lips. He nodded and immediately dropped his gaze to the floor.

Abigail stood and held her hand down to the boy. “Mr. Ethan, would you be a gentleman and take my hand and walk me to my house?”

“He doesn’t—” Knight broke off when Ethan released the hem of his frock coat and took Abigail’s hand.

Shock rocked Mathew to his core. That the boy willingly accepted her out-stretched hand more than surprised Mathew. In the six months the child had been with him, Ethan shunned all attempts by strangers to win him over. It didn't matter if that stranger was male or female, Ethan wanted nothing to do with someone he didn't know. He had one of three responses to an overture such as the one this woman made: stare at the ground, bury his face against his father, or hide behind Mathew in the length of his frock coat.

It had taken him weeks to win the slightest trace of trust from his son. That trust was still fragile.

He had no idea how much Ethan remembered about Georgianna, though he doubted it was much more than impressions. This woman, like Ethan's mother, had a soft voice, a slight repressed accent if his hearing was correct, and like Georgianna, she was a shade of blonde that defied definition. The color shifted from wheaten to strawberry to champagne, depending on how the light struck it. He supposed the similarities were enough to bring a sense of familiarity to the boy.

Realizing the woman and his son walked farther away from him forced Mathew to jog several steps to catch up. An unsettling sensation of being watched caused a thread of unease to ripple the length of Mathew's spine. He glanced from one side to the other, not noting anything that was out of the ordinary—as if he would know what ordinary was in this small town. He shook off the unease and settled his gaze once more on the sway of Abigail's skirt, the motion of the fabric more pronounced with her posture tilted down to Ethan's level.

His son angled his head to her, and though Mathew couldn't hear a word of whatever conversation might be taking place, he had no doubt Ethan was talking. He struggled to take a breath past the sudden tightness in his throat and chest.

Mathew followed her to the back of the large home next to the hotel. She gestured for him to enter the domicile first. Ethan paused with her, and the smile beaming on the boy's face renewed the tightness in Mathew's throat. He'd only seen its like once or twice. In less than ten minutes, this woman had somehow found Ethan's smile.

Mathew swept off his hat and took the few seconds before she followed him into the kitchen to take a quick measure of the room. Two cast iron skillets hung on hooks over a cook stove that gleamed with blacking. A large covered pot simmered on the back of the stove

and filled the air with the aroma of beef stew, setting his mouth to watering. Cheesecloth covered two loaves of that just baked bread she mentioned. A pair of wire baskets hung on either side of the stove, one filled with onions sprouting long, green leaves and the other with a few potatoes. Those appeared to be past a point of salvaging, as not only did the tubers have eyes, but also stems and leaves. The transom over the backdoor, created of leaded glass crafted into a pastoral scene, was open, allowing the heat to escape.

The room was clean and airy, while also managing to convey warmth and comfort. He hoped there wasn't a formal dining room in this house, because truth be told, he'd always preferred to take his meals in the kitchen. As that thought crossed his mind, Georgianna's cutting remark that he belonged in the kitchen with the servants rang through him.

He forced those recollections away and watched Abigail guide Ethan to the sink. She lifted him under the arms, and then settled the boy on the counter. "My goodness, there is almost nothing to you."

Mathew bristled, then forced his anger away. She hadn't remarked on Ethan's size as an insult. Rather it sounded as a simple stating of fact. There really wasn't much to Ethan.

"Hand washing is required before eating any cobbler or ice cream," she said, and she lifted the handle on the hand pump.

Too late, Mathew realized her intent. "Don't!"

Ethan paled, and a thin, keening whimper broke from him. He leaped off the counter before Mathew or Abigail could halt him. He slid on the floor, scrambled to his feet, and sought an avenue of escape. Mathew dropped his hat onto the counter, twisted around, and caught Ethan at the back door. He snaked an arm around the boy's waist and hoisted him into the air. Ethan clawed like a cornered and trapped wildcat, and when that didn't have any results, kicked in his desperation. His heel caught with a glancing blow in Mathew's ribs. Ethan maintained a disconcerting silence in his struggle, other than a low grunt of effort.

Abigail stood frozen at the sink, and stared wide-eyed at him, her mouth sagging farther open by the second. Mathew dropped Ethan to the floor and caught the collar of his shirt before the child darted out of reach. He could imagine just how disturbing this had to appear and racked his brain for a manner to explain it.

"What is happening?" Shock added a pained edge to her voice and her gaze lowered to the writhing child.

"He's terrified of water." Terrified was an understatement. When he found Ethan in the orphanage, the child was so filthy that dirt was ingrained in his skin and his hair hung in greasy, matted lengths. After determining the first order of business would be to clean the boy up,

Mathew learned quickly how deep Ethan's dread of water ran. He still carried the scar on his forearm where Ethan had sunk his teeth into him. "As far as I could ascertain, he'd only been bathed in freezing water before I found him, and I suspect he was held under in an attempt to subdue him."

Ethan's nails dug into Mathew's wrist as the boy clawed and thrashed against the restraint in his frantic attempt to get enough purchase to make good an escape. More than anything, Mathew wanted to put the child over his knee for this behavior and knew from bitter experience that only made matters worse. Reasoning didn't work, either. His only recourse was to hold the boy at arm's length until he exhausted himself.

"What happens if you let him go?" She didn't lift her head to meet his eyes; her gaze stayed riveted on Ethan's struggles.

"He'll run out the door and we'll spend hours trying to catch him to calm him down." Mathew shook his head and tightened his grip on the boy's shirt collar, preventing Ethan from biting him. "I'd prefer not to chase him for half the night."

Abigail sidled away from the sink to the heavy door. She eased it closed, then threw the bolt into place. "Let him go, please. We can stop him from leaving the kitchen now."

"Stand in the doorway." Mathew nudged his head over his shoulder at the entrance to a hallway that he assumed led to the rest of the house. "If he gets out of this room and finds an open window or door, we'll be chasing him."

She didn't argue with him and moved to block the only other avenue of escape from the room. Mathew released Ethan's shirt collar.

As soon as he realized he was free, Ethan scrambled to the locked door, pulling futilely on the knob. The transom rattled in its frame with the force of Ethan's desperation to open the door. Broken, frightened sobs ended his silence and punctuated his repeated attempts to pull the door open. When he couldn't open the door, he kicked it and then spun around, seeking another route to flee. Even though neither Mathew nor Abigail did anything to halt him, Ethan continued to dart around the large kitchen as if he was a cornered wild thing. His cries sounded as howls of frightened frustration.

What felt to be an absolute eternity passed before the child took refuge under the table. Only Ethan's heavy gasps and whimpering moans broke the strained silence. A clock somewhere in the house tolled the bottom of the hour. When the silence continued, Mathew risked a glance at the woman still standing guard in the doorway to the rest of her home.

Disbelief and horror twisted her features into a frown. How difficult would it be for her to annul a marriage by proxy? Surely that

was what she had to be thinking. Legally, they were married, but without a consummation, there wasn't a marriage.

Mathew braced himself for the demand he knew would be coming forthwith—that he remove himself and his feral child from her house immediately. He quickly calculated how much of the twenty-dollar gold piece remained. If he was extremely frugal until the next train, whenever that was, he should be able to purchase a ticket for himself and Ethan to another place farther on down the line.

Maybe, he could make his way up into the Dakota Territories. In a hell-on-wheels community, no one would expect Ethan to be clean and washed. As with any large group of men, there would be the women who followed that community. He wouldn't ever consider leaving Ethan in the "care" of some of those women, but a laundress might be hired to tend to the boy while he was engaged in the utterly back-breaking labor of laying track.

Demanding, physical labor had never put him off. He could get a job working on the railroad currently being constructed through the territories, if he could swing a sledgehammer with one hand. If not that, there had to be other jobs to be done in laying train track. Maybe, just maybe, the railroad would hire him as a physician to treat men injured on the line.

Abigail's rigid stance softened. Her gaze dropped to the floor for several long seconds, and then she blew out a short breath. Without a word, she went to the sink. Water splashed into the washbasin as she wrung out a rag. She set the small scrap of cloth on the counter, pulled a covered dish closer to her, and scooped out a large portion of the promised cobbler into a small bowl.

Still without a word, she picked up the bowl and the rag and made her way to the table. As if she handled delicate bone china, the cobbler and a spoon were set on the table. With a squaring of her shoulders and another harsh, short exhale, she picked up the rag and fell to her knees.

Mathew's jaw dropped when she flipped up the oil-cloth cover and crawled under the table with his son. He braced himself in anticipation of Ethan's next effort at escape. He'd have to scramble quickly to catch him before the child reached the hallway leading to the rest of the house.

Murmuring from under the table reached him, but he couldn't discern the words. There wasn't another attempt at escape either. He forced himself to relax ever so slightly.

When Ethan emerged, the dirt smudges on his face were gone and Ethan himself held the damp rag. Though bright color from his exertion to escape marked his little cheekbones and his eyes were red-rimmed, he seemed calm. Mathew allowed himself to release the

breath he suddenly realized he had been holding. Abigail followed his son and assisted him into the chair with the cobbler in front of it. Ethan picked up the spoon. She touched his wrist and held up one finger, a clear signal to wait.

Ethan twisted in the seat to watch her when she went to the ice box. A tenuous smile started when she returned to the table with the afore mentioned ice cream. The smile grew with the generous dollop of the cold treat she placed on top of the cobbler.

Unwilling to break this unforeseen peace from Ethan, Mathew didn't move, other than to turn his head to keep Abigail in his line of sight. She reached a hand out to his son. She smoothed her palm over his head, clearly a comforting and calming gesture. Her smile held a hint of sadness when Ethan looked up at her, spoon poised over the dessert. She nodded, and he dove in.

The thud of a larger bowl onto the table broke the silence. She turned to him and Mathew knew he was in it deep. Anger glittered in her eyes and the only color remaining in her face highlighted her cheekbones with vivid splashes of bright rose. One hand lowered to Ethan's slender shoulder.

"Who did this to him?"

Mathew recoiled. There was the accusation he'd heard too many times, as if the charge wasn't who had done it, but why *he had done* this to his own son. As if he was a monster who took delight in tormenting children.

Abigail didn't allow Knight to answer before she demanded "Was this the reason you didn't tell me about him when you wrote?"

She noted Knight's shoulders tightened, and his lips compressed into a thin line. He took a step back and spoke in an undertone, "I assumed most women wouldn't want to take on a child that isn't theirs, much less a child who isn't normal."

Abigail sucked in a breath, struggling to keep her anger in check. Knight's undertone cautioned her this wasn't a conversation to have where Ethan could hear them. She glanced down at the child. Ice cream dripped from his chin and bits of cobbler crumbs outlined his lips. It wasn't a battle to soften her tone to say, "Wipe your mouth, Ethan."

She rubbed the tips of her fingers back and forth over her lips and chin, gesturing where he needed to clean. Dutifully, Ethan picked up the damp rag and scrubbed the sticky mess from his face. She smoothed the curls covering his head again before she answered the veiled accusation in Knight's words. "You've made an assumption about what I would or would not be willing to take on, Dr. Knight."

In her struggle to keep her backwoods accent from her words, Abigail realized she had tightened her fingers on Ethan's shoulder. He grew as still as a statue, barely breathing. She released the pressure but didn't remove her hand. Instead, she ran her palm down his painfully thin arm, bent to look into his face, and smiled. She glanced meaningfully at the remaining cobbler and ice cream, and he resumed eating.

All the times she and Sam had tried to have a child of their own came in her memory, filling her with a sense of loss so deep and profound she felt as if she was sinking into a bottomless well. How could anyone harm a child? Children were to be treasured, cherished, and protected. She made herself address Knight in a level tone. "I would like to speak with you on the back porch."

"I can't leave Ethan. He becomes hysterical," Knight said, the words nearly a monotone, as if he had repeated that warning often.

Abigail knelt next to the child and waited for him to turn to her. "Sweetie, your father and I need to have a grown-up talk. We are going to go outside onto the back porch. We are not going to go anywhere but the porch. Will you stay here and finish your cobbler? When you're finished, you can come out, too."

Ethan's dark eyes shaded. He shifted his gaze from her to his father

and then back.

Abigail's heart twisted with the fear and panic darkening his eyes. "I promise, Ethan, we're just going out onto the porch. I'll even make sure you can see your father through the doorway."

Again, Ethan looked from her to his father. When his gaze returned to Abigail, the fear faded from his eyes. He nodded and spooned up another bite of his treat.

Abigail jerked her chin toward the bolted back door. Knight scooped up his hat, paused long enough to leave a lingering gaze on his son, squared his shoulders, and walked to the door. Abigail followed him onto the porch. Before she spoke, she looked into the kitchen.

Ethan sat rigidly, his face turned to the opened doorway, his gaze darting from side to side. Without a care for proprieties, she grabbed the front of Knight's frock coat, tugging him several paces to a side so he stood directly in the boy's line of sight.

"How can you not know who terrorized that child?" She growled the words in a low undertone, not wanting them to carry into the kitchen.

"I can't hear you." Knight shook his head. "I'm...I'm deaf in my left ear."

The mortification and humiliation in his voice hung between them as palpable as a living being. Shame tightened her chest. She stood on his left side and had been on his left at the train station. It wasn't just the train that had made it impossible for him to hear her at the station. Just as every other man who had answered the plea from the town of Brokken to come and assist in their struggle to keep the town alive, this man was broken.

She shifted so she was closer to his right. "What do you know about what happened to Ethan?" She deliberately softened her tone, hoping to take any accusation from her voice and words.

Mathew turned and glanced over his shoulder at the boy. He gave a nod, as if satisfied Ethan was still calm, lifted his head and stared across the distance. "I know very little. I sent my wife to her family outside of Atlanta for the laying-in and delivery. I was granted an emergency leave when word came Georgianna had delivered him. There had already been two major skirmishes close to our home in Tennessee and I wanted her away from the fighting. I thought that deep into the Confederacy, they would be safe." He paused, and his eyes slid shut. Every nuance of his posture screamed defeat. "I was wrong."

The pain marking Mathew's voice found a receptive audience in Abigail. This time, when she gripped his lower arm, he didn't fling her hand away.

He looked down with another deep breath. “Shortly after Ethan was born, I was injured and captured and sent to a prisoner camp in Illinois. When I was paroled at War’s end, I went to Atlanta to bring my wife and son back to our home in Tennessee—or what was left of it. Her family home had been razed to the ground, and none of the people left there knew where she or Ethan were.”

He fell silent, as if unable to continue.

The hammering on the façade of the butcher’s and candy maker’s shop ended. A few disconnected notes from a fiddle drifted closer. Distant shouts of laughter and camaraderie made their way from the other end of the town, from the direction of the Brokken Arrow Ranch. A dove cooed from the roof, answered by another.

She shouldn’t be standing this close to him, her hand on his arm in such a familiar manner, but to pull away now would be just as wrong. And just as damaging as if she struck him.

“I found Ethan in an overcrowded orphanage about six months ago. He wouldn’t speak when I first found him. He wouldn’t look at anyone. He was more of a wild thing than a child.” He took a step back, breaking the physical contact between them. “He’s still more wild than anything else.”

“No, he’s not. He’s a frightened little boy.” She glanced into the kitchen. Ethan sat quietly at the table, his cobbler finished. “What happened to his mother?”

Mathew twisted around to stare at Ethan and spoke without turning to Abigail. “She tried to flee with Ethan in advance of Sherman. Her body was found almost a week later. Ethan was discovered near her.”

“So, he saw her...” Abigail swallowed the painful lump in her throat, her heart aching for the small child sitting at her table. “He saw her killed.”

“That would be the safe supposition, especially in light of his very physical reaction to anyone wearing a blue uniform.” Mathew craned his head over his shoulder. “I’ll get Ethan and go to the hotel and set about getting this marriage annulled. We will be on the next train as soon as the marriage is ended.”

The whole world tilted. “You’re making an assumption, again, Dr. Knight.”

“Am I?” His hand twisted around the back of his neck. “There’s no assumption that Ethan is a difficult child.”

Abigail wanted to grab him by his broad shoulders and shake him. At least enough to make him turn around and look at her. She made sure her words were aimed at his right side. “You’re still assuming what I am willing to take on.”

His slumped shoulders straightened in degrees with each word she

said. Encouraged, she added, "Even though our vows were said by a proxy, we both promised to stay with one another for better or for worse. What would it hurt to agree to continue this proxy marriage for a trial period?"

"Ethan. It would harm Ethan if at the end of your proposed 'trial period' we decided to go our separate ways." He still had his back to her. "Were it not for Ethan, I would have never even answered your advertisement."

"If you answered that advertisement simply to find a mother for Ethan, I can accept that. Stay in Brokken." A strange tightness entered her chest and closed her throat. She recognized the desperation rising in her—her desperation to be a mother, to end the loneliness of her empty evenings, and to ensure her friends and neighbors would have a competent physician. "Ethan needs a mother. Brokken needs a doctor."

"That's the whole crux of it, isn't it?" He twisted his head over his shoulder again. The distance she saw earlier had re-entered his eyes.

Crux. She had no idea exactly what the word meant and to admit to that might be the tipping point to guarantee his departure. She could guess what it meant but if she was wrong...Abigail lowered her head. "I don't know what that word means. Crux, that is. That word."

The rustle of his frock coat reached her though he didn't respond to her confession. In the strained silence, she lifted her head to meet his gaze. One brow lifted slightly. Her cheeks heated with her humiliation and her mouth felt as dry as any arroyo in the middle of July. She had never felt so intimidated or lacking as she did at that moment.

"I never had a lotta schooling," she managed to whisper, all the while twisting her hands in the fabric of her skirt. Another nervous habit she hadn't been able to break. She let go of the material and shoved her hands into her pockets. "I still ai...am not a good writer."

Crawling into a deep hole and pulling the earth in over her suddenly seemed to be an excellent idea in the light of his further raised brow. That her backwoods accent made itself heard loud and clear only added to her mortification. Too late, she also realized she admitted she hadn't written her letters to him. "I'm not stupid, just not schooled good."

"Please accept my apology if you believe I inferred you are lacking intelligence." His gaze shifted from her to the opened doorway.

"However, we still haven't resolved this issue. I risk Ethan's well-being —"

"I would never hurt a child."

"I did not say you would. However, I will not risk further damage than has already been inflicted on him by his mother's death and my

failure to..." He trailed off, his gaze never straying from the open door.

"You didn't fail him because you were captured and held in a Union prison."

"I wasn't there when he and Georgianna needed me the most." His voice became a low snarl. "By anyone's definition, that is a failure."

"You did not fail him." Abigail reached a hand out, hesitated, and then settled her palm on his lower left arm. The wasted muscling solved the mystery of why he had so far kept his hand buried in the pocket of his coat. Either he had no mobility in his arm and hand or he was embarrassed with the visible reminder. "No more than Sam failed me when he died in a Union prison. You're here, now, with Ethan. He still needs you."

Mathew tilted his head to her hand. "I will repeat that I will not risk further damage to his emotional stability on a proxy which may or may not become permanent."

"Then make it permanent." Abigail fought to keep her voice low, to hide how frantic her heart beat and how desperately it ached for his son. "Surely marriages have been built from lesser reasons than wishing to protect a child."

Mathew dropped another glance at her hand on his lower arm, this time in a more pointed manner. "If anything happened to me before I got here, at least Ethan would have someone." His jaw clenched in what she recognized as anger. "You want me to risk my son on your illusion of desiring children? Desiring children and rearing children are two very different things. A proxy marriage was a risk I took because *your letters...*"

Her letters. They were her words and her thoughts, but not her writing. Abigail withdrew her hand in degrees, as if she gave ground to a cornered rattler. His words stung. "Are you always this blunt and cruel?"

"I'd say I'm pragmatic—it means to be sensible and realistic without succumbing to emotion—"

The heat searing her cheeks should have blistered her skin.

"—and as a physician, I cannot afford to either have or offer vain hope. So, what is it the reality you wish to build this *marriage* of ours on?"

Could she walk away from this? Her gaze shifted from him to the child still sitting in rigid anticipation at her table. How much had Ethan overheard? How much had he understood? Anger tightened her focus and compressed her heart. She made herself lean closer to Mathew. "The only reality there needs to be is for you to be a competent physician for this town. That's the only reality I care about. Stay or leave. The choice is yours, Dr. Knight. If you leave, you cannot

ensure Ethan will always have a home and that stability you seek for him.”

She shoved her way past him into the house and paused at Ethan long enough to lift him from the chair and set him on his feet. The desire to pull him into her arms and envelope him within a hug tightened her throat. She forced what she hoped to be a normal tone to her voice. “Your father is out on the porch.”

“No wanna leave. I good. I good!”

“Yes, you are. You’re a very good boy, Ethan.” Despite her attempts to keep her voice low, somehow, he had overheard their conversation. Ethan tilted his head to her, his dark eyes even darker with fear. The searing lump in her throat felt as large as all of Texas. This small boy had found his way into her heart already, and it was breaking into hundreds of pieces. No matter how she answered the child’s distress, it would drive a knife through her own breast and paint his father with a black brush.

Ethan spun to the doorway when Mathew crossed the threshold, sparing her the pain of answering his cry.

“Stay. No wanna leave.”

The ache in Abigail’s heart answered the desperation in the boy’s voice. Blinking did nothing to quell the tears welling in her eyes.

“Ethan, come here.” Mathew stood in rigid, unyielding stiffness.

Ethan turned around and grabbed Abigail’s skirt, as she had seen him cling to the hem of his father’s frock coat. He buried his face against her skirt and though the fabric muffled his words, his plea still sounded as a mournful whimper, “No wanna leave.”

“Please, come here, Ethan.” Amazingly, Mathew’s voice softened with the repeated command.

“Go to your father.” The words felt bitter and poisonous in her mouth and as if they shredded her throat. Abigail gently pried Ethan’s fingers from her skirt, then turned him to Mathew.

Ethan looked over his shoulder at her, his face twisted with a crestfallen expression. He dropped his head and shuffled across the floor, dragging his feet as he went.

Mathew’s left hand finally emerged from his pocket, the fingers warped and gnarled as the limbs of an ancient live oak. He scooped Ethan into his arms, but his challenging gaze never left Abigail’s face.

“Stay.” Ethan’s teary voice crawled the distance. He shoved his hands against his father’s shoulder and pushed himself as far from Mathew as he could. “No wanna leave.”

Mathew didn't pull his gaze from Abigail, though Ethan's distress-twisted features filled his peripheral vision. The trembling in his son's limbs transferred to Mathew and filled his chest. Abigail's sight lowered to his hand in the middle of Ethan's back. The revulsion and disgust he expected to see never materialized.

"Mrs. Bailey and I have to go find the preacher..." He hesitated, unable to recall the man's name. Abigail's eyes widened as he continued, "...so we can stay."

"Stay." Ethan repeated the word with all the stubbornness of a four-year-old determined to have his way.

"Is this what you really want?" Mathew wasn't sure if he was asking his son, himself, or the woman on the other side of the kitchen. Ethan vigorously nodded. Abigail's head dipped in the slightest of nods.

"There are some things we will need to settle before we can go find the preacher." Mathew pulled his sight from Abigail and directed his attention to the boy he held on his hip. "You've had cobbler and ice cream but no supper."

"Not hungry."

Mathew struggled with the urge to hug the boy tightly to him. Those were words he seldom heard from Ethan. "You might not be, but I am."

His gaze slid over to Abigail. Renewed color suffused her cheeks. He held her gaze as he bent and lowered Ethan to the floor. What he hoped to be a repentant half-smile crossed his features. "I apologize for my thoughtless and needlessly harsh words. I allowed myself to stoop to churlish behavior."

His apology broke the seeming immobility from Abigail. She gestured to the table. "Please, sit. The roast has been simmering all day. It will just take a few moments to start coffee brewing. Or would you rather have tea?"

"If it's not too much trouble, I would prefer coffee."

Ethan tugged incessantly on the hem of his coat. He glanced down at the boy and Ethan pointed across the room. Before he could admonish his son for the rude behavior of pointing, Ethan whispered, "Pretty."

Mathew snapped his head to Abigail. He gently pushed Ethan's arm down. "Yes, Ethan, she is a beautiful lady. I've told you, though, it's not polite to point. Please don't do that again."

The color drained from her features, she stood motionless for what felt to be a lifetime to Mathew, and then she blinked. She blinked again while she tilted her head to the floor. A flood of rose and pink replaced the lack of color in her cheeks. She took three plates out of the cupboard. After collecting eating utensils from a small drawer under the counter, she set the plates and silverware on the table.

"Is there somewhere I can wash off some of the dust and grime that travel by train seems to perpetuate?" Mathew scratched the stubble on his face. "Or, if I have time before supper and the barber is close—"

"Melody closed her shop up today for the festival." Abigail audibly swallowed before she gestured to a narrow door he had assumed to be a pantry. "Sam built a shaving room right off the kitchen, there." Another audible swallow. "You're welcome to use his razor, soap, and stop. I'll bring some hot water in for you."

The pain of her loss shimmered across the room, a pain Mathew knew only too well. "It's not easy, is it?"

She shook her head, all the while twisting her hands in her skirt. Mathew considered crossing the floor and pulling her into his arms and negated that idea. She didn't need empty platitudes any more than he had needed them on the train. Still, he murmured, "I'm sorry."

Another nod of her head, a slight gesture toward the closed door. Her voice sounded thick with unshed tears when she said, "I'll start heating water for you."

Ethan stood in the doorway. This wasn't the first time the child had watched him shave, but it was the first time Ethan came within his vision calmly or willingly for this task. All the times before, Ethan had been near him out of necessity, mostly out of fear when Mathew was out of his sight. Mathew paused his ablutions. On an impulse he picked up the shaving brush and dotted the last of the drying soap to the end of Ethan's nose. A sound he had never heard rippled from his son—a soft giggle.

Mathew gulped in a breath, struggling with the urge to lift the boy in a crushing hug.

Ethan rubbed the soap from his nose, then wiped his hands together, and lastly down his trouser legs. "I do that?"

"Not for a few years." He bent to Ethan. He refused to correct the child wiping his hands down his pants' legs if only because to do so would banish the elusive and rarely seen happiness coloring his son's expression. "I want you to promise you will never touch this razor. It can cut you. It can hurt."

Ethan's eyes widened. "No touch."

"Thank you." He straightened and met his own reflection in the

mirror. Forced to complete what once had been routine with only one hand prolonged the task. He twisted his head, canting his vision hard to the side and removed an area of growth he had missed on the first pass. A dull metallic clank reached him from the kitchen, and a few moments later, the aroma of the supper she had prepared filled the small shaving room. His stomach rumbled, evoking another soft giggle from Ethan.

Mathew lifted the razor to pull it a final time down his throat when he paused. "Did you say the barber's name is Melody?"

"Yes." Abigail's voice drifted from the kitchen. "When her husband left for that blasted war, she took over the business. She's still the town barber."

"The advertisement wasn't exaggerating when it said you lost most of your men."

"It was my idea to send off for mail-order grooms, but I also argued against letting the whole world know just how vulnerable Brokken was without those men."

Abigail joined Ethan in the doorway. Mathew dropped the razor into the washbasin and grabbed the collar of his shirt. Thank heavens, he hadn't draped it over the small chair in the corner of the room, merely dropped the suspenders from his shoulders and shrugged the shirt off so that it hung from his waistband. He hurried to pull the garment up his arms.

If she noticed the withered and mangled remains of his left arm, she didn't call his attention to it. Instead, she lifted the razor from the still warm water, shook it closed, and extended it to him. "When you're finished, supper is ready."

Mathew took the closed straight-edge from her hand and carefully opened it. "I'll be done here in a minute or two."

She still hadn't moved away from the washbasin. Her gaze drifted from his face to the opened throat of his shirt before returning to his face. He found himself unable to move under her scrutiny, and he held his breath, waiting for her to say something. Anything.

Instead, she took the razor from him. Her cool hand tilted his head back, and she pressed the razor to his throat. Mathew let his eyes slide shut and braced himself. The blade slipped smoothly against his skin, and then he heard the razor drop into the washbasin again. He opened his eyes.

The smile lifting her lips raised the temperature in the room.

"I never cared for facial hair before." Even though her fingertips were cool, they left a smoldering trail in their wake as she traced his jaw to the edge of his carefully trimmed goatee. "This suits you."

Ethan stepped between them and patted Mathew's stomach. "Hungry."

Abigail leaped back as if scalded. Mathew finally tore his gaze from her face. He pulled the closed razor from the soapy water. "I'll set this out to dry."

She nodded and backed away. "I'll finish putting supper on the table. Ethan, will you come into the kitchen and help me?"

Ethan slipped his hand into hers and as much as pulled her from the small room.

Mathew grabbed the edge of the washbasin stand and bent his head. He wasn't prepared for this. Wasn't prepared to find himself almost at wit's end with the overwhelming urge to tell the devil to take the hindmost and make getting an annulment impossible. Wasn't prepared for emotions he thought long dead and buried with Georgianna to be stirring to demanding life. Wasn't prepared for Abigail and everything she represented that he thought was lost forever.

He forced himself to stand upright and stared at his reflection in the mirror. This was what he wanted for Ethan, wasn't it? With each button he closed on his shirt, he listed the reasons this was best for his son. *Stability. Safety. Security.* In short, a loving home. Everything he had failed to provide for his own son.

Tying his tie took longer than it usually did. He picked up his frock coat and pulled the garment on. With a last tug to straighten it, he left the small room.

Ethan sat at the table while Abigail bustled around the kitchen, setting out the supper she said was ready. She paused long enough to send an encouraging smile in his direction and gestured to the head of the table. "Coffee's ready. Cream and sugar are on the table. Please, sit down while I get your coffee."

Mathew pulled the chair out and sank into the seat, staring at the meal spread out before him: a roast surrounded by potatoes, carrots, and onions, a gravy boat nearly overflowing, bread baked to a golden brown, butter, honey, jam...When was the last time he'd had a full meal? While sitting at a table? He was sure Ethan had never seen such a feast.

After Abigail handed him a cup of steaming brew, she sat next to Ethan, and then lowered her head over her folded hands. In the silence that grew, Mathew realized she waited for him to say a prayer. When the words wouldn't come, she lifted her head.

"I'm a little out of practice in speaking to the Almighty," Mathew admitted. "Maybe it would be better if you gave the blessing."

A soft smile lifted the corners of her mouth. She nodded in understanding and then took one of Ethan's hands into hers and extended the other to him. Hesitantly, Mathew encircled her fingers, and then clasped Ethan's small hand. Abigail bowed her head again.

AFTER SUPPER, MATHEW cradled a second cup of coffee and leaned into the tall ladder back of the chair. Roasting coffee beans properly prior to grinding so they could be brewed into the dark liquid was an art Mathew had never become proficient at. Abigail, on the other hand, judging by how quickly he drained his first cup and how easily the second was disappearing, was a master. The faint strains of music entered the kitchen.

“Is there some sort of celebration going on tonight?”

“You missed the street festival that started the day. It’s an annual event, celebrating the founding of Brokken.” She lifted the serving platter from the washbasin, rinsed it, and set it out to dry while she answered him. “There’s a barn dance tonight so all the gentlemen who have arrived can set about wooing the ladies.”

“Would you allow Ethan and me to escort you to that dance?” The question tumbled out his mouth before he fully thought through all the repercussions of such an action.

She spun around, soapsuds clinging to her hands. Her face lit with the smile pulling at her mouth. Then, she sighed and turned her attention to the sink and the dishes. “Only if you would feel comfortable doing so, Dr. Knight.”

Honestly, he wouldn’t, but the smile that graced her features for a brief time goaded him to screw up some courage. No one knew him here. No one knew how desperately he had failed first Georgianna and Ethan and then so many men in that Union prisoner of war camp. He carefully set the cup on the table. “As Ethan and I are staying, perhaps this would be a good manner to meet some of our new neighbors. However, before we all make our appearance, can we agree to be on a first name basis?”

Her head bent to the washbasin, and she stilled. The change in the room affected even Ethan. He placed the spoon on the table and looked over at her. Her shoulders rose, then lowered, and she twisted her head to him. “I would like that very much...Mathew.”

She hesitated so long before she said his name he wondered if she even would. He gulped a swallow of coffee to alleviate his suddenly dry mouth. Her smile when she looked to Ethan grew and softened at the same time. Mathew averted his gaze to the depths of his cup when his heart quickened in response to that soft smile.

Water splashing in the sink drew his attention to her again. The very last rays of daylight entered through the opened back door, bathing her in crimson and gold. Rose-gold shimmered in the long tendrils escaping the braid trailing down her back. The urge to loosen that braid and watch her hair spill unbound over her shoulders ran through him.

Mathew shoved away from the table, hoping to distract his thoughts from such musings. He crossed the floor to the sink and set his empty cup on the counter. "The rest of the dishes will wait, Abigail."

Her name felt comfortable on his tongue, startling him more than anything had so far this day.

"I've found if I don't finish the dishes in the evening, they seem to multiply in the sink overnight." She scrubbed a supper plate with more industry than he thought necessary.

Mathew slid his empty cup into the hot water and took the washrag from her. He moved another step closer to her, his chest almost against her shoulder. "In my experience with dishwashing, limited that it is, I've noticed there is always a cup or a plate or even some silverware that escapes the hot water and is found after the wash basin has been drained."

She continued to look into the sink. The pink coloring her cheeks and ear tips also darkened the smattering of freckles visible along the slope of her cheek.

"They will still be here after the dance, Abigail."

She tilted her head to him. Earlier, he would have sworn her eye color was brown, not the same shade of cinnamon as the freckles dotting the bridge of her nose and delineating the slopes of her cheeks. "I suppose you're right." She seized the dish towel next to the basin and dried her hands. "I do need to freshen up before we go. If you wish to brush some of the dust from your coat, there is a garment brush in the front parlor behind the bar."

"The bar?" Mathew allowed his gaze to cut toward the hallway leading to the front of the house.

The pink staining her ear tips deepened and splashed along her cheekbones, darkening the freckles. "Um, yes. The bar. The house...it was...it served as a brothel before Sam and I bought it. The front parlor is rather gaudy. *Mrs.* Donovan, the madam who owned it before we bought it, had ostentatious tastes, as Sam put it."

Mathew glanced down the hallway, again. The blush staining her cheeks deepened further and told him the parlor was more than gaudy. Abigail's sudden discomfort precluded satisfying his curiosity as to just how risqué the front parlor might be. "Ethan and I will wait for you on the back porch."

He escorted Ethan out the door and watched his son climb into the two-seated swing, kicking his feet back and forth. The glider began a slight forward and backwards motion with Ethan's kicks. Mathew leaned a shoulder into the roof support. He let his gaze skim over the thick tree line a few hundred yards from the house. The railroad tracks cut through the trees. Almost directly to the east stood a short,

squat, solid building—the jail, if his assumptions were correct.

“You the new doc in town?”

Mathew startled and took a step back, closer to Ethan. The child scrambled from the swing. The tug at his hem was the same he’d felt every time Ethan latched onto his frock coat. Without looking, he knew the boy hid behind him. Mathew sized up the newcomer, unsuccessfully quelling the ripple of unease that traversed the length of his spine. He’d been so deep in thought he hadn’t heard the younger man approach. “Yes.”

The smile breaking over the young man’s face looked like an opossum hissing in defiance. “Guess you’ll be getting a room over at Sophia’s.”

“I hadn’t planned on it and Abigail hasn’t asked me to do such.” Mathew dropped his hand onto Ethan’s shoulder. “Who are you?”

“Sorry. I’m Robert Roden.” The grin reminiscent of a possum narrowed. “Guess Abby forgot to tell you that we’re getting married tomorrow afternoon.”

Chapter Seven

Abigail was marrying this snake? No. Even if she hadn't already married him by proxy, he just couldn't envision her consenting to spending the rest of her life with Roden. He might have only made her acquaintance that afternoon, but he would bet his life Abigail would never marry anyone like the young man standing in front of him.

Mathew let his gaze travel over Roden. Oil of some sort slicked what was probably blond hair. He wore a dark brown, cut-away frock coat over a champagne colored silk vest, and a pristine white shirt. A lighter brown tie encircled his neck. It wasn't that he was dressed as some sort of dandy that unsettled Mathew. Rather it was the sharp features, the cold, almost emotionless depths of his eyes, and the heavy revolver strapped down to the man's thigh. The ripple of unease grew. "Maybe she didn't tell me because she and I were married by proxy a month ago."

Roden put a foot on the lowest step. "Proxy isn't married. It can be easily annulled. Or terminated."

Mathew didn't take his gaze from Roden as he bent to Ethan. "Go into the kitchen and wait for Abigail there, please."

Ethan couldn't have been out of earshot when Roden said, "He's a cute kid. You know Abby can't have kids of her own. She and Sam tried, but—"

"I've never put a lot of stock in the validity of gossip." How in the name of heaven did this snake know that?

Roden quirked his brows and added a smile as oily as a barrel of whale grease. "Ain't gossip. Everyone in town knows it. Just like everyone in town knows you were a Reb doctor."

"I told you to never come to my home again, Robbie, unless you were truly dying." Abigail's voice brimmed with ice.

Mathew spared a glance over his shoulder. Abigail stood with Ethan's hand held in hers. Anger leached the color from her face and sparkled with hard glints in the cinnamon depths of her eyes.

"It's Robert, not Robbie." The oily smile tightened and grew chilly. "I asked you the day I went off with Hood's Brigade to stop calling me Robbie."

"You were with Hood?" Mathew drew his shoulders back, unable to control the reactionary recoil.

"Please don't encourage him." A long-suffering sigh whispered behind Mathew.

"From the very start of the war." Roden's overly friendly smile

returned, dripping again with false charm and snake oil. "I was in the Third Infantry and was wounded at Chancellorsville."

If disgust had a sound, it was the short, huffing breath from Abigail. "His pride was the only thing wounded at any time in that war."

"Bragg made some serious mistakes at Chancellorsville. Almost cost Longstreet and Lee that battle," Mathew said. Serious mistakes *were* made in that battle, but not by Braxton Bragg.

"Hood wanted to fight." Roden sagely nodded. "Bragg kept us in reserve."

"Bragg wasn't at Chancellorsville. Neither was Hood nor any of his Texas Brigade. Hood was never under Bragg's command." Mathew took several steps closer to the windbag. "I was with the medical corps attached to Longstreet's division, and I know there wasn't a Third Infantry with Hood's Brigade."

The rat scurried backwards. "I rode with Hood."

Mathew quelled the urge to roll his eyes with Roden's insistence of "riding" with Hood. He assumed claiming to have ridden with Hood for a Texan was the same as a Virginian claiming to have been at Appomattox Courthouse urging "Ol' Marse Lee" to continue the fight. If as many men had actually been in Lee's Army of Northern Virginia that day as claimed they were, the Confederacy probably wouldn't have surrendered, much less lost. "I'm inclined to doubt your claims of being one of Hood's Texans."

Roden's face blotted with angry color. He reached for the revolver strapped to his leg, seemed to think better of it, and backed another step away.

"Mr. Roden, kindly step aside so that I may escort my wife and my son to the festivities." Mathew inclined his head to Abigail, took her elbow, and led her and Ethan off the porch. Without being too obvious, he asked, "Where are we going for this dance?"

In a move that seemed to shuttle Ethan in front of them, she gestured toward the north end of town. "The Brokken Arrow Ranch. Just slightly outside of town."

The soft glow of lanterns led Mathew away from Abigail's home. Ethan dropped to Abigail's side. Though they walked away from Roden, Mathew was sure he followed.

In front of the town's shuttered bank, Abigail snapped, "Mathew, slow down. I'm nearly dragging Ethan."

A quick look over his left shoulder revealed Ethan's face flushed and sweaty with exertion. Shame ricocheted through him. Mathew halted. "I can carry you, Ethan."

His son glanced up at Abigail and then shook his head. "I walk. Abby say I big boy."

They had been on his left side. Any complaint Ethan might have had or suggestion from Abigail to slow his pace had been unheard. "I'll walk slower. Or take shorter steps."

The smile lifting her lips tightened his chest and sped up his heart. Mathew resumed walking, angry with himself for his reaction to her almost shy smile. He simply required a gentler influence for Ethan. Or at least that's what he had almost convinced himself of. She—on the other hand—had stated in no uncertain terms all she wished of him was that he proved to be a competent physician. Yet, completing his shaving routine for him had been anything other than the disinterest she professed.

Flirtation he understood. *That* had been more than flirtatious behavior.

He halted with Abigail's gentle tug on his arm. Her brow furrowed when he snapped his head to her.

"What's wrong, Mathew?"

His gaze dropped to Ethan before he brought his sight back to her. "What do you really want from this? I'm a little confused because I don't think it was my competency as a physician you were interested in earlier."

Color flooded her face, visible even in the twilight. She stepped closer to him. His breath caught in the back of his throat when she smoothed her palm over his chest. "I'm not sure I can explain it."

"Try."

"I loved Sam with all my heart. But he's been gone for more than four years." Her voice cracked. The deep breath she drew shuddered. "I didn't know just how lonely and empty my heart has been until I saw you and Ethan. Every one of the men who have come here because of those advertisements is broken in some manner. Ethan is just as broken. He's as broken as you are. As I am. I can't have children of my own. Sam and I...we tried. I miscarried, or they were stillborn."

His angry words earlier echoed in his head, searing his conscience. So, the little rodent had been correct in his sharing of the gossip about Abigail's childless state. To avoid her tear-filled gaze, Mathew turned his sight to the lamplight spilling out from the wide-open doors of a large barn and what he could see of the couples inside. The glow of a single lantern over the doors drew more than the citizens. Moths and other insects fluttered around the lamps while either bats or nightjars swooped with abandon into the veritable feast. Partners moved across the cleared space, their steps according to the instructions of the caller.

Her hand slid from his chest to his withered and useless left arm. "I know I'm not Ethan's mother and never will be."

“Making that comparison would be a grave disservice to you.” Mathew shook his head and met her gaze again. “You don’t have to be her. Just be you.”

A single tear slid down her face. “Maybe I was too forward earlier. Maybe it was dishonest of me to have Vic write my letters, but I didn’t want you to think I was stupid. A doctor has to be smart and if you thought I was stupid...”

“No cry, Abby,” Ethan murmured. His son wrapped his arms around Abigail’s leg and leaned his shoulder and head against her, the closest to a hug he had ever seen from Ethan.

“There is a big difference between not having a ‘lotta book learning’ and being stupid.” Her eyes widened with his deliberate use of her own words and dismay filled her already crestfallen expression. Mathew leaned into her and tucked a wayward strand of hair behind her ear. “I’m not belittling you, Abigail. Anyone who may have ever accused you of stupidity simply proved their own lack of intelligence.”

Another tear slid down her cheek. “I don’t want to be alone anymore.”

“Neither do I.” God help him, not three hours earlier he had himself convinced he wasn’t looking for another wife, just someone who would nurture Ethan. And then he met Abigail. He raised his left hand, pausing to glance at the gnarled and twisted fingers. “Are you sure this is what you want?”

This time, he knew who he asked and why he asked it.

Without any hesitation, she pressed the back of his hand to her cheek. A tremulous smile lifted her lips. “I knew when I read your first letter.”

Mathew didn’t attempt to extract his hand. “Why did you agree to my stipulation we be married by proxy before I arrived here? That could have gone badly for you. You could have found yourself married to a short, fat, balding man with a hair-trigger temper.”

To his surprise, a deep, genuine laugh broke from her. “You forgot bad breath.”

“What?”

“My best friend, Victoria, said the reason you didn’t include a description of yourself was because you were short, fat, balding, with a nasty temper and bad breath. It could have gone just as badly for you. I could have been an utter nag who hates children.” Another laugh, this one softer and shorter, sounded. “Have you ever felt something was right, even though there was no reason to believe that feeling? That’s what I felt when I read your letter. It was right.”

“So is this.” Mathew leaned fully into her, wrapped an arm around her waist, and caught her lips under his. Before he could deepen the kiss, a male voice filled with disapproval intruded.

“Abigail, I will choose to believe it is the excitement of the evening which has led to such a public display of affection.”

Mathew twisted his head with measured deliberation toward the speaker. The man was older, greying, with a stomach gone to a middle-age paunch, and a gaze that peered at Abigail down a long, hawkish nose in outright censure. Abigail attempted to put some distance between them but ceased the effort when he tightened his arm. Ethan ducked behind them. Mathew released Abigail’s waist and lowered his hand to his son’s shoulder, startled to discover Abigail’s hand already on the back of the boy’s head with her fingers splayed through the loose curls.

“Pastor Grisson. Good evening.”

She had enough ice in her voice that Mathew felt the chill. He decided to follow her lead of neither apologizing nor attempting to justify their public display. He dipped his head in a brief nod.

“Pastor.”

“Are you Dr. Knight, Abigail’s intended?” Grisson’s gaze drifted down to Ethan.

Mathew wasn’t sure exactly what he saw crossing the preacher’s expression, but he knew he didn’t like it. “Husband, by virtue of a legally binding proxy. Though I’m sure I can speak for Abigail in saying we would like to repeat those vows we offered to one another through a proxy and have the full blessing of the Almighty on our marriage.”

Grisson’s expression tightened before he forced half a smile. “And the child?”

“My son.” The hair rose on the back of his neck in warning. There was something not right here. A tug on the hem of his frock coat let him know, without even looking down, that Ethan latched onto his coat.

“I’m sure you’ll agree, Abigail, that the Lord works in mysterious ways. Your prayers for a child have been answered.”

Condescension charged the warm night air. Mathew slid a sidelong glance to Abigail. All the color drained from her face and her expression mingled pain and outrage. He removed his hand from Ethan’s shoulder and slipped his arm around her waist, again. Her trembling ignited something fiercely protective deep inside. Mathew gently pulled her ever closer into his side and said, “God always answers. It may not be the answer we wanted, but He always answers.”

“Enjoy the festivities tonight.” The preacher’s half smile faded. “Church starts at nine tomorrow morning.”

Mathew watched as the preacher made his way to a smaller gathering of couples several feet outside of the barn. At length, he

cocked his head to Abigail, breaking the sudden uncomfortable silence between them. "I don't think I like him. I'm not sure I wish to attend his church."

"I'm sure he doesn't like you." Her soft words further shattered the discomfort. "He was very angry you dictated on what terms you would come to Brokken. He tried to tell me a proxy marriage wasn't right in the eyes of the Lord. I don't agree with everything he preaches, and I've told him I don't see eye to eye with him."

"In other words, you can think for yourself." He brushed the rebellious strand of hair from her cheek again. "What a novel idea...a woman who knows her own mind and is strong enough to stand by those convictions."

"Are you making fun of me?"

"No. Speaking with sincerity and admiration." He extended his arm to her. "Shall we join the festivities?"

Ethan scampered in front of them, drawn as much to the brightly lit interior of the barn as the moths to the lanterns. He attempted to catch a lightning bug that floated near him. What seemed to be millions more of the glowing insects blinked in rapid pulses in the bushes and trees. The loud chorus of tree frogs almost drowned out the musicians.

Mathew nudged his head toward the woman on his arm. “Did you help your husband when he was treating his patients?”

A wistful expression softened her features and hint of sadness tinged the small smile that crossed her face. “As much as I could. My grandmother and mother taught me all they knew about healing poultices and tinctures and plants that can be used as medicines. Sam...he...he was starting to use some of my backwoods remedies before he left.”

By the second year of the war, medicines in the South had been nearly impossible to acquire. When it was all he had, Mathew resorted to those backwoods remedies to treat fevers, pull out infections, stop wracking coughs. “Tomorrow, show me what you have in those remedies and teach me how to use them.”

She bowed her head. Anguish darkened her voice. “You’re making a joke at my expense.”

“No, I’m not.” He glanced over at Ethan, assuring himself the boy wasn’t too far away, and then dragged a hand through his hair, debating how to bolster her. Abigail continued to walk at his side with her head bent to the ground, much in the same manner Ethan did when he tried to avoid notice. Mathew came to a halt and caught her shoulders, turning her to face him. He waited for her to look up. When she didn’t, he said, “Abigail, I’d be a fool for not availing myself of your knowledge of the local flora that can be used medicinally. I would have sold my very soul to have those remedies that last winter at Camp Douglas. So many men died because I didn’t have even the simplest of medicines. There was nothing I could do to prevent their deaths.”

She still didn’t lift her gaze. Mathew slipped his hand along her cheek and tilted her head to him. “I am not making a joke of you or your remedies.”

Movement out of the corner of his eye pulled his attention from Abigail. Ethan staggered backwards, head reared back, his small body rigid. Before he could move toward his son, Abigail rushed the few

feet. She dropped to her knees and fully enveloped the boy in a protective embrace.

“Bad man. Bad man.” Ethan repeated the words so rapidly his sobbing cry blended into one continuous sound.

“No, sweetie. There’s no bad man here. I promise. No bad man.” Abigail pressed a kiss to the top of Ethan’s head. “You’re safe here with your father and me.”

“Bad man.” He twisted around to Abigail. “Momma...bad man. Bad man.”

He wasn’t so shocked with Ethan’s actions that he failed to note his son addressed Abigail as “Momma.” Mathew tamped down his surprise and even jealousy to scan the faces, looking for the perceived threat Ethan saw. Just outside of the opened barn doors and walking toward them in a slow manner was the obvious choice. Blue wool shirt, denim trousers, white suspenders, sweat-stained slouch hat...he stepped in front of Abigail’s kneeling form, hoping to block Ethan’s view.

“Mr. McCoury, come over here, please,” Abigail said.

Blue Shirt heard the invitation Abigail extended. The elevated volume of her voice ensured that.

Mathew snapped his head around to Abigail. She held Ethan so his back pressed against her shoulder, his terrified face to the approaching, seeming danger.

“He’s not a bad man, Ethan. He’s a good person and you’re a brave, brave boy.” Her voice was calm and level, her cheek against Ethan’s.

“What do you think you’re doing?” Mathew asked. Ethan’s breathing turned into rapid panting the closer Blue Shirt came.

She continued to hold his son in a protective manner but tilted her head up to Mathew. “A little less than half this town was Union.”

“I don’t care if the whole town was a Union stronghold.” The fierce protectiveness he’d felt earlier for Abigail returned a thousand-fold over Ethan. “I think I know my son a little better than you. Forcing him to confront—”

“Most of the men who did survive that war and returned here fought for the Union. Many still have those blue sack coats and shirts simply because it’s the only garment not in tatters.”

There was a great deal of truth in what she said about that uniform shirt or coat being the only garment most of those men had after the war. Many, like himself, had been dressed in little more than rags after that damned war.

Abigail plastered what Mathew recognized as a patently false smile onto her face. “Mr. McCoury—Yancy—would you be so kind as to introduce yourself?”

Caught between her forced smile and the stranger approaching behind him, Mathew settled for glaring at Abigail and muttering through clenched teeth, “We will talk about this later.”

“Yes, Mathew.” Her arms tightened on Ethan’s thin form and her head bent to his. The widening flare of the boy’s dark eyes alerted Mathew to the man’s immediate proximity. With a final glare at the frustrating woman, he turned to face the man.

Blue Shirt stood less than an arm’s length away. Mathew found himself forced to look up to be able to meet the man’s gaze. He’d never been accused of being short, but compared to this man, he felt positively puny. Mathew spared another glare over his shoulder at Abigail that should have shriveled her if any of the anger burning in his chest communicated itself into his gaze.

“Miss Abby was hoping you really would come to Brokken.” Blue Shirt stuck his hand out, the scents of peppermint and sugar drifting from him. A wide, genuine smile creased his face. “Yancy McCoury, though most folks just call me Yank.”

Without being insufferably rude, Mathew couldn’t decline. There was strength in the man’s grasp, but nothing that lent itself to the impression this was a show of force. “Yank?”

“When me and my kid brother, Travis, was younger, he just couldn’t say ‘Yancy.’ For some reason, it always came out as ‘Yankee.’” Yancy’s smile faded but didn’t vanish entirely. He added, almost in an undertone, “Travis died in the Hornets’ Nest at Pittsburg Landing. I keep the name out of respect for him.”

The Yankees called it Pittsburg Landing. He knew it as Shiloh, for the small Methodist church around which the battle raged. Both sides agreed it was a brutal fight and the skirmish names within that bloodbath—the Peach Orchard, the Bloody Pond, the Hornets’ Nest—recalled the horrors for those who survived the fiery crucible ironically named with a word that meant “a place of peace.”

“A lot of good men died at Shiloh,” Mathew admitted.

“A lot of good men died in that war, whatever you want to call that ‘late unpleasantness.’”

“That war never should have happened. Can we please not discuss it now?” Abigail’s voice was so soft Mathew almost couldn’t make out the words.

McCoury’s took a step closer to Abigail and Ethan, his gaze shifting down them. He swept his hat off. “Beggin’ your pardon, Miss Abby.” Yancy’s attention came back to Mathew. “I didn’t catch your name. Or your little one’s.”

“Mathew Knight.” McCoury’s single step closer to Abigail allowed Mathew to put all three into his line of vision. He nudged his head toward Abigail and his son. “My son, Ethan.”

“Good to meet you, Doc.” Yancy bent over, reducing his imposing height. “Hello, Ethan. I’m Yank.”

Mathew took a step closer, intending to end this torment. Before he could say anything, McCoury knelt by Ethan.

The boy shied as far from McCoury as he could but made no attempt to run. He didn’t shuffle backwards, though he did press his back into Abigail’s shoulder. She stroked his upper arm and continued to hold her cheek against the side of Ethan’s head. Mathew couldn’t make out a single word she murmured to his son.

The giant of a man reached into his shirt pocket and extended a peppermint stick. “You’re a shy little one, Ethan. Of course, I’m awful big. Might have something to do with you being so shy.” McCoury’s voice softened, and he seemed to be making himself appear as small as possible.

It was more the Union blue shirt McCoury wore, but Mathew wasn’t about to mention that, though maybe it was the man’s size. Abigail wasn’t holding Ethan as tightly as before, and if he wanted to run, he could have broken free with ease. Ethan was obviously frightened, but not out of his mind with terror.

McCoury didn’t retract the confection. “You can have this. I have a lot more. Miss Abby didn’t tell you that I own the candy store in town, did she?”

Ethan didn’t lift his head, but his eyes rolled up toward the red-and-white-striped stick. He extended a trembling hand to the offered treat but pulled back before his fingers closed on it.

McCoury said, “I’ll bet your pa will tell you it’s okay. That is if you ate all your supper. You did eat all your supper, didn’t you?”

Ethan’s head jerked up to his father. Mathew nodded. The boy’s wide-eyed gaze slid to Abigail. He didn’t need to be able to hear what she said. With the encouraging smile and indistinct murmur for Ethan, he would bet a month of Sundays she was giving him permission to take the offered peppermint stick.

Jealousy flared, white-hot and unreasoning. What was so special about Abigail Bailey—no, it wasn’t Bailey. She was his wife, whether or not they ever stood in front of that preacher. So, what was so special about Abigail Knight that she had earned more of his son’s trust in a few scant hours than he’d been able to garner in six months? Mathew stepped back, attempting to tamp down that ugly emotion.

Abigail caught Mathew's step backward out of the corner of her eye. Without breaking the contact of her cheek against the side of Ethan's head, she directed her attention to Mathew. A furrow marked his brow with the narrowing of his eyes, while a tension of some sort clenched his jaw and stiffened his shoulders.

Ethan shoved his hand toward the peppermint stick and took it from Yancy. Abigail murmured, "Can you tell Mr. McCoury thank you?"

"Thank you." Little more than a whisper and with his head bent to the ground, she wondered if anyone could hear Ethan.

Yancy patted the boy's shoulder. Ethan shied into Abigail's encircling arms but didn't attempt to escape. Mathew's harsh intake of breath went unnoticed by Ethan and Yancy, or so Abigail hoped. If Yancy did notice, he made no mention of it.

"Tomorrow, if it's all right with your pa and Miss Abby, one of them can bring you to my candy store. I have a job for you and for Abe, Miss Molly's boy."

"What job?" Mathew demanded.

Abigail snapped her head to Mathew with the growl evident in his voice. Yancy chose not to respond to the fierce protectiveness radiating from Mathew. The man Abigail often thought of as a gentle giant uncoiled his great height and stood. "It's actually something to get Abe out from underfoot. This little man here, he's the only kid even close to Abe's age. He's a normal, active little boy, but that makes it kinda tough for Molly to run her restaurant."

"Abe is good boy, just very curious," Abigail explained for Mathew. She looked into Ethan's face and smiled. He clutched the peppermint stick as if not entirely sure what to do with it. "It's candy, Ethan. You eat it."

"He's never had candy, that I know of." Defensiveness shaded Mathew's voice.

"Been some tough times," Yancy said. "When folks is trying to keep body and soul together, a bit of candy for a little one isn't as important as keeping them fed."

Tough times would be an understatement for a lot of the people Abigail knew. The fraying cuffs, missing button, and patched elbows of Mathew's frock coat spoke of the hardships visited on him, and by extension, Ethan.

She rose to her feet, but left a light hand on Ethan's shoulder, a

manner to reassure him there was no danger. "Times will improve. They already are. Look at everyone—I haven't seen this many smiles in I don't know how long."

"Seems the only one around here not smiling is you, Doc." Yancy nudged Mathew with an elbow. "If you're not going to dance with this pretty lady, I'm sure going to."

"Mr. McCoury!" Heat flooded Abigail's face. Other than the protest of her neighbor's name, she couldn't force another word free. She risked a glance up at Mathew. Something shifted in the depths of his dark eyes and the color warmed.

"I brought her here to dance with her." Mathew's gaze drifted to Ethan. "I just don't—"

"Ethan, see those benches over there?" Yancy bent to the boy, holding one hand out and with his other hand pointed in the general direction of several bales of hay, strategically positioned along the perimeter of the dance floor and covered with bright cloth to protect the more delicate fabric of ladies' skirts. "What do you say you and I go sit over there while your pa dances with this pretty lady here?"

The peppermint stick in Ethan's hand quivered when his small fingers tightened around it. He looked at his father—Abigail saw Mathew's head dip in approval—and then at the benches and lastly to Abigail.

"We'll be right where you can see us, Ethan, I promise," she said.

A half smile creased his small face. That seemed to be enough of an assurance for him. He took Yancy's outstretched hand and only glanced back once.

"He's never even considered walking away from me until today." Mathew turned to a side with a sharp inhalation. "He called you momma."

"I think he was trying to tell us it was bad men in blue uniforms who hurt his mother." As much as she wanted that to be what Ethan intended, she couldn't acknowledge that longing. Not with the taut edge in Mathew's voice. She took his right hand into both of hers, willing him to look at her. "He can just be a little boy here. No worries. No cares or concerns. You gave him a reason to trust Yancy, so he could be brave and go with him."

The anguish lining his features when he looked at her tore into her heart. She waited for him to break the silence. His head turned to the hay bales where Yancy and Ethan sat. "He couldn't possibly remember his mother. Or that I'm his father. He just knows me as the person who took him out of that orphanage."

"He knows he can trust you, and for Ethan, that's enough."

"The first time I saw him, he was just a few days old, and I was lost. He had me held tight in that tiny little fist." Mathew dropped his

head then gradually brought his gaze to her. "I didn't even know his mother had been killed or that he was in an orphanage until the war was over. I went to every orphanage in Georgia. It took me over a year and a half to find him."

"But you found him. You didn't stop looking for him until you did find him. And, since he's been with you, he's learned he can trust you."

Muffled applause reached them as the music of one dance ended.

"This is not taking you to that dance." In the interlude between dances the low murmur of voices underscored the rhythmic croaking from the rain frogs. Her breath caught when Mathew extracted his hand from hers and raised it to her cheek. Without breaking eye contact, he tucked a wayward strand of hair behind her ear. Mathew should have been able to hear how rapidly her heart pounded.

Isaac Iverson's deep bass voice boomed across the distance. "Pick your partner for the Virginia Reel."

As determined as Mathew was to keep his injury and left hand hidden, Abigail inwardly sighed. This wouldn't be a dance—

"May I have the honor of partnering with you for the reel, Mrs. Knight?"

"No."

An immediate, cold distance filled his expression. She rounded her palm over his shoulder and added, hoping to undo the misunderstanding of her quick answer, "I'll dance with you if you ask me with my given name, Mathew."

The slow smile lifting the corners of his mouth warmed the cool distance from his dark eyes. The same warmth invaded Abigail's chest and filled her arms with a strange impulse to wrap themselves around his neck. He sketched a shallow but still very formal bow. "Will you dance with me, Abigail?"



SEVERAL DANCES LATER, Abigail was out of breath. Mathew escorted her over to Ethan and Yancy. Again, he cut a formal bow, and then said, "I'll find some punch for you."

Yancy snorted. "Downright stiff-shirted, there, Doc, especially considering little Button here and me were betting each other if you were going to kiss your bride. Looked to me like you almost did a few times."

Surely her cheeks were blistering as hot as they felt. Abigail couldn't even force a reprimand from her throat. The recollection of Mathew's hand in the middle of her back to pull her closer into him during the waltz warmed her further.

Mathew hiked up a brow and sent a smile in her direction that

would have caught the tinder dry woods on fire if he'd aimed it in that direction. "Being a Yankee an' all, you might not know this, but a Southern gentleman never kisses and tells. Besides, I don't want my bride to run afoul of Preacher Grisson, again."

Deep booming laughter broke from Yancy. "Since you've been so generous with your counsel, Doc, let me offer you some. Avoid the punch bowl the sheriff is guarding. She tends to fortify it with either homebrewed or Oh, Be Joyful."

Mathew snapped his head in Victoria's direction. "You have a woman sheriff?"

Abigail nodded, while Yancy grinned from ear to ear. "Ain't a soul around here brave enough to tell Victoria English she can't be sheriff. Her daddy turns a blind eye to her total disregard of his no-alcohol rule for his congregation."

Paul Grisson turned a blind eye to a lot of things, Abigail bitterly mused, then pulled herself up short. Grisson's insistence that his congregation avoid alcohol started shortly after Jonathan left. He also pushed through the rule banning public displays of affection after Victoria's husband was gone. How much of that was because he was brave once Jonathan's overbearing presence was no longer in Brokken or was it a belated attempt to protect others from what his daughter had suffered?

"Times have been tough." Mathew repeated Yancy's observation of a little while earlier. "If you will excuse me, I'll go find some punch that isn't spiked."

When Mathew was out of earshot, Abigail leaned closer to Ethan. "Didn't I tell you Mr. McCoury was a good man?"

"Not bad man." Ethan agreed and glanced at the candy-maker with a wide grin.

"Ethan's been tellin' me all about the train ride he and his pa had to get here." Yancy patted the boy's crown. "Get him started and he's downright talkative. Seen any chickens here, Button?"

"Chickens?" Abigail turned her gaze to Ethan with the boy's mischievous giggle.

Ethan threw his head back, his nose pointing to the roof of the barn, and twisted his shoulders back and forth in a sashaying motion. "Mean ladies chickens."

In an instant, Abigail knew to whom the child referred—the two women who had gotten off the train with Mathew and proceeded to demand if Brokken had a boarding house. A chuckle broke from her. They had indeed walked like puffed-up hens.

Ethan's amusement faded. "Mean ladies said bad things. Little girl hungry."

Abigail turned to Yancy. McCoury lifted his shoulders in a shrug.

Apparently, Ethan hadn't elaborated on the "bad things" said or who the little girl was. The candy-maker looked across the improvised dance floor to the opened doors at the rear of the barn. He leaned his elbows onto his knees. "Now what is that little weasel up to?"

She followed his line of sight. Robbie stood just inside the door engaged in an animated conversation with Pastor Grisson. A sigh broke from her. "Mr. McCoury, be polite, please. There are small pitchers here with very big ears."

"I *am* being polite." He pushed himself to his feet with Mathew's return. "Doc, I'll leave your wife and son in your care. I have a rodent problem to deal with."

"The sheriff promised me it's both safe and legal." Mathew handed a cup of Victoria's punch to Abigail. "What was that about? Mr...I mean Yank's comment about a rodent problem?"

"That." Abigail inclined her head toward Robbie. She sipped the punch and immediately choked and coughed. "Vic wasn't totally honest with you. Did you try this?"

"No, I didn't." Mathew sat on the other side of Ethan. "Looks like your friend is trying to cut off Mr. Roden."

The lanterns strung around the barn revealed Robbie marching in a determined manner toward Abigail. Pastor Grisson and his wife, Trudy, followed in Robbie's wake. The small entourage was oblivious to McCoury's large form advancing in a similar resolute manner toward them. On the periphery of the dance floor, the two hens stood with arms crossed. Victoria emerged from behind her small booth and trotted toward her parents.

"This can't be good," Abigail said. Victoria's sense of when serious trouble was brewing was seldom wrong. Most of the town's folk knew of the sheriff's ability to sniff out trouble and Victoria's haste to reach her parents didn't go unnoticed. As surely as a pebble tossed into a pond created ever-widening ripples, all activity gradually came to a halt, flowing away from Brokken's sheriff.

Grisson's demand for McCoury to step aside carried to Abigail in the uncanny silence. Mathew rose and looked down at her. "Why do I have the sinking feeling this involves me?" he whispered.

Abigail came to her feet, hesitated, and turned to Ethan. "Stay here, please. We won't leave your sight, but please stay here."

Ethan nodded. The flickering lantern light only accentuated how wide his eyes were with an undisguised fear. She paused long enough to brush her hand across his head. "It'll be fine. I promise."

She spun around and trotted a few steps to join Mathew. Without a word, she slipped her hand into his, and squeezed his fingers. He didn't visibly acknowledge her support, but he returned the gesture.

"Father, if this showdown is because of something Robbie said, you

know more than half of what he ever says isn't true." A sharp edge knifed through Victoria's voice.

"Stay out this, Victoria."

Victoria. The only time Grisson used the formal form of her name, he was either angry or disappointed with his daughter. Abigail's throat constricted.

The small party halted a few feet from Abigail and Mathew. Grisson spent what felt to be an eternity to glare at Mathew. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Mathew's shoulders tighten and his chin lift, as if he was bracing himself. Abigail bit the inside of her cheek to keep a smile curtailed. If Pastor Grisson was waiting for Mathew to back down, he was going to have a very long wait.

Grisson gave ground first. His gaze slid over to Abigail. "I said when this man wanted to marry by proxy it was a mistake."

"I told you it was my mistake to make, if it proved to be." Abigail's courage bolstered when Mathew squeezed her hand, again. "You're my pastor, not my father. Not my husband."

"I cannot and will not marry you to this liar."

A collective, hissing gasp sounded in the wake of Grisson's proclamation. Mathew pulled his hand free. He halved the distance to the preacher with one, long stride. His very posture was as rigid as if he were carved of marble. "Sir, you might be a man of the cloth, but no one impugns my honor."

"Didn't you tell Abigail in your letter that you fought for the Confederacy?" Robbie threw the words out as a challenge. "But those ladies over there heard you tell a good Southern officer you didn't fight for Jefferson Davis."

Robbie stood just behind Pastor Grisson, wearing a grin that turned Abigail's stomach. Yank was right. Robbie was a weasel. Unless Victoria told Robbie what was in the letter Mathew sent, the only other way the weasel could have known was if he read Mathew's letter before he delivered it to Victoria and then to Pastor Grisson. There wasn't a chance Victoria would have shared any of that information with Robbie, and she doubted Pastor Grisson would have, either.

The silence that filled the barn pressed against Abigail's chest, slamming in her ears, trying to crush her.

"I served the Confederacy as best I could as a physician." Mathew as much as spat the words in Robbie's direction. "I didn't fight for Jeff Davis or anyone else. I took an oath to do no harm, so I never picked up a weapon to take another life."

"I sure didn't fight for Mr. Lincoln," Yancy joined in. He glanced at Abigail and then at Mathew. "I did take up arms to preserve the Union. As the Reb here pointed out, rodent—" He placed a great

amount of emphasis on the manner he mispronounced Robbie's surname. "—there is quite a difference. Now, why don't you go crawl back into your hole and let the rest of us enjoy what's left of this evening?"

Yancy looked over his shoulder in Ethan's direction. Mathew visibly relaxed, draped an arm around Abigail's shoulders, and together they walked back to his son. Mathew released her long enough to scoop him into his arms.

"How many men did you kill, Knight, with your saws and knives?" Robbie shouted the question across the floor. "Those were weapons enough, weren't they?"

Abigail's stomach roiled with the vitriol in Robbie's voice. As with every half-truth and lie she ever heard him utter, there was the tiniest grain of truth to the words. Mathew would have worked on men who died from battle wounds.

"How many, Knight?" Robbie asked again.

Every vestige of color drained from Mathew's face. He stiffened with the impact of Robbie's words against his back and a muscle ticked in his clenched jaw. He shifted Ethan in his arms, as if to hand him to Abigail.

Before he could tell her to take the boy, she gripped his lower arm. "No, Mathew. He isn't worth listening to. Come home with me."

He inclined his head down to her in degrees. The muscle in the plane of his jaw twitched stronger. In the stunned silence that still held, the sound of his grinding teeth seemed to echo in the sudden stifling air of the barn. Abigail repeated in little more than a whisper, "Come home with me."

Ethan dropped his head onto his father's shoulder, adding his own, "Go home. I tired."

Some of the rigidity left Mathew's frame, though none of his color had returned. He acquiesced with a slight nod and they left the barn.

The dull thud of their footsteps into the dusty earth of Main Street vibrated into Abigail as mournful as a funeral dirge. It seemed even the rain frogs had fallen silent for this angry march. The freshly cut pine boards of the façade of the butcher shop glowed in the darkness, appearing like the never-ending pine boxes during the agony of that war.

A challenging voice cut through the darkness. "You killed so many sawing arms and legs off that you lost track of how many died?"

Abigail risked a look over her shoulder. Robbie followed them, as did Victoria, and what appeared to be half the town. Victoria she could understand and that her friend followed Robbie frightened Abigail. The sheriff still anticipated some sort of trouble from Robbie. But the rest of those people? No doubt they were expecting some sort of show.

"Shut up, Robbie." Victoria's demand cracked like a whip. "The rest of you, go back to the dance or go home."

"You're a coward and a liar, Knight."

"I said to shut up, Robbie." The murmur of so many voices muted Victoria's second order to Robbie.

Mathew halted, so angry he visibly shook. "Take Ethan home."

"Mathew, no," Abigail pleaded with him. "Don't. Please."

It was as if she hadn't spoken. He pushed Ethan into her. She wrapped her arms around the boy to keep him from falling. Mathew turned on a heel to face Roden.

Abigail growled under her breath. "Stubborn."

"I sorry," Ethan said.

"Not you, sweetie." Abigail remained a few paces behind Mathew.

"Mathew, go home." Victoria gestured away from the Brokken Arrow Ranch and toward the main part of town.

"Sorry, Sheriff, I can't do that." Mathew's head never even tilted to Victoria. It appeared his gaze had locked onto Robbie.

Now that they had reversed the retreat, and Mathew aggressively advanced on him, Robbie didn't appear so confident. His gaze darted between Abigail to Mathew and his hand twitched over his holstered gun.

Thomas Reed, the new cook at Molly's Corner Café, separated himself from the rest of the crowd. "Hey, Rodent." Reed stopped and stood far enough from Mathew's progressing form that he forced Robbie to move his head from side to side.

Sudden, intense nausea filled Abigail, leaving her light-headed and compelling her to halt for fear of dropping Ethan.

"The sheriff told you to shut it." Reed held up his arm that had been amputated just below the elbow. The long sleeve of the shirt had been pinned back to his shoulder. "I don't know what you think you're going to accomplish, but I can tell you, those doctors saved my life. If a doc like him hadn't sawed part of my arm off, I would have died from gangrene."

Robbie snapped his head to Reed and drew his revolver in the same motion. The muzzle aimed into the cook's chest and Robbie held it there, without shooting. Reed raised both arms in slow deliberation. A collective gasp rose from the citizens, but Mathew still didn't stop advancing.

"Bad man," Ethan whimpered, the words shaking nearly as much as the child did. Abigail pressed Ethan's face into her shoulder. She stared at Victoria, willing the sheriff to do something to stop Robbie.

Robbie waved the revolver between Mathew and Reed. "How about I shoot your other arm, Thomas, and then we can see if he's as good as that doctor who saved your life?"

Victoria pulled her own weapon. The hammer jacking back sounded as loud as if she had fired the gun. "How about I blow a hole through your head, Robbie? Holster that thing, now and don't you try no border roll, either."

Abigail's stomach twisted with painful knots as it seemed neither

Mathew nor Robbie paid the least attention to Victoria.

"That makes you the biggest toad in the pond, doesn't it, pointing a gun at two unarmed men?" Mathew stopped less than a foot from the end of Robbie's revolver.

"He's only partially unarmed." Robbie jerked the muzzle at Reed. "I can make him fully unarmed."

Although Reed reared back, Mathew seemed totally unfazed. "Yeah, you're real brave."

The muzzle snapped back to Mathew and Robbie took a step forward, pressing the revolver to Mathew's chest.

"Doc, back up. He ain't worth dying for." Reed hadn't moved, hadn't lowered his arms. "We both know he ain't."

"Where'd you get the laudanum, Roden?" Mathew's accusation growled over the distance.

Abigail was certain her heart was lodged so tightly in her throat she was going to choke. Ethan's whimpering cries rasped in her ears and his frightened tears scalded her through her shirtwaist. Other than Mathew and Robbie, no one seemed to be even breathing, as if they were frozen watching this grotesque drama playing out.

A single click cracked as loudly as thunder, followed by a second click.

Abigail held her breathe.

"All I gotta do now is squeeze." The words sounded as a taunt.

"You're brave, as long as you have enough laudanum in you and you're holding a gun." If Mathew felt any intimidation or consternation with the muzzle pressing against his chest, he never revealed it. "I can smell the laudanum on your breath, and your pupils are constricted. In this light, they shouldn't be. That's what it takes for you to screw up enough courage to threaten an unarmed man?"

Victoria met Abigail's gaze across the short distance separating them, and then she took a step closer to Robbie. Slower than Abigail would have expected, Robbie twisted his head to the sheriff. In the instant his attention wasn't on Mathew, Reed launched himself at Robbie as if he had leaped off a horse onto a maverick calf. Mathew grabbed Robbie's wrist, wrenching his arm down and behind his back. Reed's momentum carried all three men to the ground.

The strange immobility holding the town's citizens captive shattered with the loud bark of a solitary shot. Several women screamed, and Abigail couldn't swear she wasn't one of them. She started forward, only to halt when Yancy appeared out of nowhere and caught her arm at the elbow.

"Give Button to me before you go rushing over there."

She handed him the boy and paused just long enough to thank him before she ran the several feet to Mathew. Victoria pulled Mathew to

his feet by the back of his collar. Blood covered the lower half of his shirt front. Abigail skittered to a halt, her hands flying to her mouth.

Mathew looked down at himself and held his hands out to her. "It's not mine."

Abigail flung herself the final few feet at Mathew. Her arms wrapped around his neck and she buried her face against his shoulder. "What were you thinking?"

"I honestly wasn't." Mathew gently pried her arms loose but didn't extract himself from her embrace.

Robbie's wailing shout echoed off the façade of the buildings. "He shot me."

Abigail lifted her head from Mathew's shoulder as several voices turned into a cacophony. Thomas Reed also appeared to be uninjured. Victoria pulled Robbie to his feet, eliciting another wail from him.

"I can't walk!"

With a deep sigh, Mathew broke Abigail's embrace. "Sheriff, I haven't had a chance to inspect the medical facilities at Dr. Bailey's home—"

"You ain't touching me."

Victoria shook Robbie as if he were a misbehaving child. "I'll take him over to the jail. Bring whatever you think you might need to treat a flesh wound."

Reed inclined his head to Robbie's backside, and then looked up at Mathew in slow degrees. The corners of his mouth twitched with a barely contained grin. "It doesn't appear to be life-threatening, Doc, but then I'm no expert. I've known a few people who had their brains in their posterior."



MATHEW EASED THE BACK door open. Exhaustion thrummed in every fiber of his body. An empty ceramic cup sat on the table, ghostly in the low-pitched lamp light. He dropped Sam's medical bag onto the counter and picked up the coffee pot, swirling the contents to determine how much might remain. Not sure if he wanted a cup of hours old brew, he returned the pot to the stove top.

"It should still be warm. I brewed it only an hour ago."

Startled, he turned toward Abigail's voice in the darkness. She emerged from the hallway. His gaze drifted down her—past her hair unbound and draping her like a shimmering silver-gold shawl, to the lace of her night-gown peeking out at the wrists and hem of the faded calico robe she wore, to her bare feet—and back to her face. "Where is Ethan?"

"I finally got him asleep on the davenport in the parlor." She paused at one of the ladder-back chairs and gripped the top rail of the

back. “Did you even consider him when you decided on a showdown with Robbie? He could have killed you and Ethan would have seen it.”

Mathew raked a hand through his hair and wrapped his fingers around the back of his neck and squeezed, hoping to alleviate some of the tension driving white-hot shards into his skull. “You’re angry.”

“Angry?” Her voice didn’t change in volume. “I’m furious. What were you thinking?”

“It’s been a long day. Can we talk about this in the morning?” Long day was an understatement. Had it really been just that morning he’d accepted a double eagle from a total stranger? “I just want to know where you want me to sleep so I can do that.”

“You’ll sleep outside on the porch if you think this will wait until the morning.” The volume increased slightly, and a harsher snap entered the words.

He lowered his hand, shrugged out of his frock coat, and draped it over the back of a chair. “You’re sounding like a shrew.”

“A shrew?”

In for a penny, in for a pound. He’d already inserted his foot into his mouth. He may as well chew on it and savor the taste. “A shrew. A harridan. A nag.”

He regretted the words as soon as he said them. Her head snapped back as if he’d slapped her. She blinked once, opened her mouth, closed it, and opened it again to gulp in a deep breath.

“I’m a nag? Because I’m concerned with how upset Ethan—*your son*—was when he saw all that blood on your shirt? Somehow that makes me a nag? He was so upset that he cried himself to sleep in my arms.”

He glanced down at the blood-stained shirt. No doubt about it, the garment was ruined. The bow in his tie separated with the hard pull he applied to one end. The length of black satin joined his frock coat. “I wasn’t going to let that snake call me a liar. I should have used more discretion. Abby, I’m sorry.”

“Don’t call me that. The only ones allowed to call me that are people I’ve told can use that name.” The air frosted with the ice forming her words.

“You told Robbie he can use that name?” If she was determined to have a row, a perverse part of him was more than willing to indulge her. “He seemed very surprised earlier to learn we were already married.”

“Everyone in this town, including Robbie, knew we were married by proxy. You were willing to die in front of your son because the biggest liar in this town called you one? You upset Ethan and scared me to death because he—how did you put it to Pastor Grisson—*impugned your honor*? That is just...just...” She let out a long, slow

breath. “Everyone knows Robbie couldn’t tell the truth if his life depended on it. Why did it bother you so much?”

He’d scared her to death. Her anger wasn’t just because of Ethan. His willingness to give her the argument she seemed to want faded while her question forced him to ask the same thing. He unbuttoned the neck of the ruined shirt, using the time to form his answer.

“Other than Ethan, honor is all I have. I had to swallow my pride and accept charity to ensure Ethan wouldn’t go hungry.” Mathew choked on the words. He shook his head, angry with himself. “I have no pride remaining so, when my honor is questioned, I will defend it.”

When she asked her husband Sam why he married her, when he could have just taken off for parts unknown and left her to deal with the consequences, his response startled her. He wanted to know what kind of a man she thought he was. She remembered stumbling over her words only to fall silent when he said the only manner to keep his own honor, after compromising hers, was marriage. A man might have to choke down his pride but any man who could surrender his honor wasn't a man at all.

Abigail released her white-knuckled grip on the chair's back and made her way around the table. She looked into Mathew's face, his expression tortured with his own perceived failings. "You have more than just Ethan and your honor, Dr. Mathew Knight. You also have a wife who has already come to admire you. And, you have courage. It took either a very foolish man or a very brave man to face Robbie down."

A slight grin teased a corner of his mouth. "Probably falling more to the side of foolish, truth be known."

"I'll agree with that." She let a grin lift her lips to take the sting from her words. "Just promise me you won't do anything like that again."

He raised his hand to her face and brushed a tendril of hair off her cheek with the back of his fingers. "I give you my word."

Abigail's tongue stuck to the roof of her mouth and her stomach filled with thousands of fluttering butterfly wings. Her skin warmed along the lingering trail left by his touch as he traced the line of her jaw and caught her chin. He tilted her head up.

"We're not in public." His voice deepened and seemed as heated as the sun in the middle of July.

The butterflies multiplied. Tearing her gaze from his face was impossible. Sam had never made her feel like this—as if warm honey filled her insides. Her limbs trembled uncontrollably, and her heart pounded so fiercely it should be beating its way out of her chest. Her breath caught at the back of her throat when he traced the length of her lower lip with the pad of his thumb.

"Abigail—Abby—if we continue along this path, there'll be no turning back."

The words wouldn't come. She slipped her hands up his shoulders and entwined her arms around the back of his neck to pull him closer.

A loud banging on the front door drove them apart. "Dr. Knight!"

Ethan's frightened cry rolled down the hallway from the front parlor. Mathew heaved out a frustrated sigh. Despite the interruption, Abigail couldn't quell a soft chuckle. "I'll go see to Ethan—"

"Dr. Knight!" The desperation in the voice increased and the banging grew in tempo.

"That sounds like Melody. Better take the quinine with you."

"The quinine? Why?" Even as he asked, Mathew opened Sam's small black medical bag and rummaged in it, finally withdrawing a small, stoppered, brown bottle filled with the bitter powder.

Abigail gestured to the hallway leading to the front foyer. "Her beau, Gideon, has intermittent fevers followed by severe chills. It appears to be malaria."

Mathew led the way with a small lamp. "You know this won't do anything to reduce the fevers or the chills. If it is malaria, it has to run its course."

"But, it gives Melody something to do and makes her feel as if she's helping him." Abigail sat on the edge of the velvet covered loveseat where Ethan had been sleeping and gathered the boy into her embrace. He flung his arms around her waist and buried his face against her. She gently shushed the child and assured him everything was all right, all the while drawing her palm down his thin back in a soothing manner.

Mathew paused, and she watched his gaze skip around the garish room before settling on her and Ethan. "The only thing missing is the full-length painting—"

"There was one. *That* did leave." She nudged her head at the door.

Mathew lifted the lamp a little higher and opened the door. Melody stumbled into the foyer. Without even acknowledging Abigail, she blurted out, "Do you have any quinine?"

"Do you know what time it is?" Mathew glanced over his shoulder. "Your incessant pounding on the door woke my—"

"I don't care what time it is." Melody snapped the words.

Abigail shook her head. Maybe, she should have warned Mathew how easily Melody became concerned for Gideon's well-being.

"There is a man sick at my house." Melody finally seemed to see Abigail, and she managed a slightly sheepish nod of greeting. "He has malaria."

Mathew leaned his shoulder into the doorjamb. "Unless your *patient* has progressed to jaundice, you could have waited a few hours. Daylight would have been preferable. The fever will abate, which is why I'm assuming you had to be here and pound on the door loud enough to wake my son. That man's fever will go down, and he'll be fine in a few hours."

Abigail winced with the sarcasm Mathew placed on the word

“patient” and decided she needed to talk to him about his bedside manner.

“He’s not fine now!”

Ethan cringed and burrowed his face deeper into Abigail with Melody’s shout. Abigail continued to stroke his back and murmured, “It’s all right. Melody is just worried.”

“Unless he has jaundice, he will be fine, though the fever and subsequent chills are not pleasant,” Mathew said.

“What’s wrong with you?” Melody stamped her foot. “Don’t you care that someone is ill?”

“The illness has to run its course. Willow bark tea will give him some relief from the fever and chills. Turpentine works too, or so I’ve heard.” He handed the brown bottle to Melody. “Small doses, no more than an eighth of a teaspoon. It’s very bitter. I suggest administering it mixed in a shot of whiskey or some other alcohol. If he loses his sight or his ears ring, the dosage is too great.”

“He can go blind?” Melody’s voice took on a strained note.

Mathew’s instructions and precautions were the exact same things she had told Melody. Either Melody had been too distraught the first time Gideon’s fever spiked, or she didn’t take Abigail’s warnings and guidance seriously.

“It’s only temporary if he does.” Mathew’s voice softened and took on a more calming tone. Maybe he did have a bedside manner. “Blindness or ringing in his ears is the result of an overdose. Be careful when administering the quinine. The fever will fade in a few hours, with or without it. Let him rest and he’ll be fine.”

Melody looked down at the bottle in her hand. She then snapped her head up and spun on a heel. Without even a good-bye, she stormed from the house. Mathew closed the door, let out a long, slow breath and pressed his forehead to the frosted glass.

Abigail waited until he lifted his head and turned to her before she said, “It was like this when Sam was alive. I know that doctors have to be available at all hours of the night and day.”

“You’ve seen her beau. Do I need to get my coat and go tend to him?” He crossed the foyer into the parlor and set the lamp on an end table.

“Not tonight, but it might be helpful if you made it a point to go see him tomorrow. He’s never had a yellow cast to his skin or eyes. It’s just the cycle of fevers, chills, and general achiness.” Ethan relaxed against her, his head growing heavier on her ribs.

Mathew’s gaze met hers before he lowered his sight to the child curled against her. He slowly scanned the room. Abigail studied the parlor, looking at it anew, and wondered just how horribly garish he thought it was. “How did you know there was an indecent painting

hanging in this room?"

"I treated more than one man who had found 'horizontal refreshment' in a bawdy house and brought something back to camp that he never anticipated. Most of them discussed the art work. Seems every house had a nude painting of some sort." To her surprise, a deep crimson flush crept up his cheeks. He cleared his throat and added, as he lifted his sight to the exact spot where that picture had been, "Where the painting apparently hung, the wallpaper is a little brighter. The outline is still visible."

Abigail snapped her head to the spot on the wall. She had never noticed it before.

"Is he asleep?" Mathew raked a hand through his hair, a yawn breaking from him at the same time.

"I believe so." She cautiously maneuvered Ethan's head onto the small pillow. With a last brushing of her hand over his hair, she pulled the blanket up to his shoulders. The fullness in her heart expanded. Yes, in a manner of speaking, her prayers for a child had been answered.

Mathew's gaze drifted to the wide staircase ascending to the darkened second floor. Abigail twisted her hands in her robe, suddenly feeling awkward, shy, and backwards. To force herself from wondering what he thought as he continued to look up the stairs into the utter darkness, she said, "If you give me your shirt, I have some strong lye soap. I should be able to scrub most of the stains out."

"What?" He twisted his head around to her. "Oh, yes...I suppose that needs to be done."

"If I don't scrub your shirt tonight, the stains will set, and it will be completely ruined." Looking at anything, anywhere but at him seemed to be the safer alternative.

The thick Oriental rug muffled the sound of his footsteps. Forcing herself to breathe became a priority. The butterflies in her stomach fluttered to life when he leaned in closer to her and tilted her head up.

"If you have a blanket and a pillow to spare, I'll sleep in here near Ethan."

She swallowed and licked her suddenly arid lips. "Sam made the second parlor into our bedroom—I guess it's my bedroom, now—so that he could be close to his patients if any of them had to spend time under his immediate attention."

Mathew cocked his head to a side, even as he dragged the pad of his thumb along the slope of her cheekbone. "What are you saying, Abigail?"

"I don't know." She tilted her head into the caress, admonishing herself to stop being silly. She'd been married before. "I'm sorry. I...I...I don't know if I'm ready."

“It’s not easy to let go of someone you once loved.” Instead of moving away from her, he slid his hand to the back of her head and pulled her in closer and pressed a light kiss to her forehead. “When you’re ready, if that was an invitation to join you in your bedroom, I’ll take you up on that offer. In the meantime, I’ll make myself comfortable in here for the night. Tomorrow, we can get Ethan and me settled into one of the other rooms.”

To her utter mortification, she burst into tears. To hide her distress, she tried to turn away from him, only to have Mathew catch her elbow, pull her back to him, and enfold her into his embrace. Her tears became long, deep sobs with her surrender to the comfort he offered.

Somehow, though she wasn’t sure how, they ended up on the front porch, on the glider swing while she continued to sob. No doubt about it, a complete and utter crying jag had her in its grip. With her tears finally exhausted, she didn’t have the strength to leave his embrace. A shiver whispered over her, mitigated by the warmth of his arms around her and the heat seeping into her from their close contact.

“This is the first time you’ve really faced he’s gone forever, isn’t it?”

The effort to lift her head off his chest was too much. “I thought I had accepted it. I was so angry when I first heard he was gone. I was angry with him. Angry with God. Angry with everyone who wanted that blasted war. And the bargains I tried to make with God...”

“You promised to do anything, give up *anything*, your own life, even, just so it wouldn’t be true.” The depth and timbre of his voice spoke of a shared attempt to bargain with the Almighty.

“Yes.” She sniffed away the last of her tears but didn’t make any attempt to lift her head from his chest. She needed to hear his heartbeat, feel his chest rise and fall with each deep breath. Her hand traced his left arm from shoulder to wrist. Withered muscling defined the length. “How did this happen?”

“I tried to stop a guard from clubbing another prisoner. The guard drove his point home with a bayonet and pinned me to a wall for several hours.” He took an unsteady breath. “The point almost destroyed my shoulder joint, did irreparable damage to the nerves, and compromised the blood flow. This was the result.”

She made herself lift her head. A dawning horror gripped her. “Was that kind of brutality allowed at all the Union prisons?”

“By the end of the fighting, yes. Word had gotten out about the conditions in Camp Sumter—”

“Andersonville.” The very name of the place sent renewed shivers over her. As sheltered as Brokken was from much of the War, word of even that particular hell made its way into town.

“Plans were put into motion by certain members of Lincoln’s cabinet, mostly by Edwin Stanton, for retaliation against captured Confederates.”

“The Union wouldn’t do that.” She shook her head, unable to conceive of anyone who would deliberately condone such barbarism. “It’s inhumane.”

“That’s what we all thought, too. We thought they were just rumors, until rations were cut, and then cut again. We stopped receiving letters from home and were told no letters would be allowed to leave the camp. When I requested even the most basic of medical provisions, bandages and blankets, I was told to make do with what I had. I had nothing.”

“Sam was wounded and captured at the Battle of Nashville.” Abigail twisted her nightgown between her hands, and even though she recognized the action, she didn’t stop it, this time. “He was sent to Camp Chase and died just a few days later. I heard he had been shot in the stomach.”

Mathew sucked in a harsh breath. “Even with the best medical care, a gut shot from a minie ball is almost always fatal. It’s a fifty-four caliber, soft lead projectile fired at low velocity. As soon as it hits anything with any substance, the ball spreads out.”

She continued to twist the fabric, struggling to find the words to ask the one question she hadn’t been able to speak for almost four years.

Mathew slid his arm around her shoulders and pulled her against his chest again. “In his last few hours, he probably wasn’t suffering. He would have been incoherent and in and out of consciousness with sepsis, but he wouldn’t have been suffering.”

“Thank you,” Abigail managed on a whisper. “It’s little comfort, but at least I can stop wondering.”

Mathew reasoned he hadn't exactly been untruthful about whether Sam's final hours were spent in agony. Odds were, the infection and resulting sepsis would have left him out of his mind with delirium. Most of the men caught up in that war became utterly cavalier about their own mortality. "Keep marching until you stop one and die" he heard from more than one footsore, hungry, and tired soldier. To a man, though, their greatest fear was a gut shot.

He'd done what he could for the men brought to him in the surgeon's tent with bullets buried in their abdomen. Usually, all he could do at the start of the war was a strong dose of morphine to allow them to slip quietly from this life. It didn't matter whether the uniform was blue or shades of grey or butternut, the terror and finally resignation haunting their eyes had been the same. He refused to see either uniform or skin color when they were brought into that tent, often screaming in agony. There were many times he thanked God he never knew any of their names. The faces, with or without names, haunted him and their voices and pleas blended into a single deep moan of grief in his memory.

Somewhere on the outskirts of town, a dog barked, shattering his foray into a blood-drenched past. The challenging bark stirred Abigail. She murmured something unintelligible, then stretched, and sat up.

"My goodness...I'm sorry. I almost fell asleep."

"I wasn't complaining." He rolled his head back, easing the tightened muscles of his neck. "It's been a long time since I've shared a swing on a quiet, warm, spring night with a beautiful woman."

The crescent moon cast enough illumination that the immediate, heightened color staining her cheeks was visible.

"However, while I won't object to remaining here, we run the very real risk of both of us falling asleep on the glider, and we could inadvertently scandalize the whole town, especially as you're in your nightgown." He stood, turned to her, and held his hand out.

Abigail wrapped her fingers around his but hesitated to stand. He waited for her, holding her hand but not pulling her forward.

"You don't have to sleep on the floor of the parlor, unless you think you have to sleep that close to Ethan." Her color deepened even though she never looked away.

"Abigail, no matter where I sleep, there'll be no turning back here. I will have spent the night in your home."

She came to her feet, moving in closer to him with the same fluid

motion. "I'm aware of that. Even if I made you sleep out here on the porch—"

"I thought we had moved past your desire I sleep outside." He added what he hoped was a teasing quality to his voice.

"We have. But, even if you did sleep out here, everyone in town would be wagging their tongues that you spent the night with me." She brushed her slender hand across his chest, finally lowering her gaze. "I don't want to wake up alone."

The woman went to his head like a mellow, smooth whiskey. Mathew glanced down at her, reminding himself this was still a marriage in name only and likely to remain that way for some time, and castigating himself for allowing her to go to his head. "Is there a door between the two rooms which can remain open so if Ethan wakes, I'll hear him?"



MATHEW GRUMBLED AT whatever woke him from his slumber, pulled the warm quilt over his shoulders, and burrowed under the thick pillow, hoping to catch just five more minutes of sleep.

Thick pillow...He bolted upright into a sitting position, staring at the unfamiliar surroundings for several heart-stopping moments. Where was he and where was Ethan? For the previous six months, the boy hadn't been out of his sight. Ethan even slept next to him, Mathew's frock coat serving as both pillow and blanket for the boy.

The events of the last day washed over him, jarring and confusing. Mathew dropped his head onto the dark wood of the headboard and forced his breathing to level. His heart slowed from its frantic beating. He was in Abigail's home. His gaze drifted over the black wainscoting that divided the pristine white walls of the high-ceilinged room, recalling her words that this had been a second, less formal parlor—if there was formality in brothel. Sheer lace curtains fluttered in the slight breeze making its way in through the opened windows and transoms and threw dancing, shifting patterns of shadow and light into the airy room. Heavy velvet curtains in a dark shade of burgundy had been drawn back from the windows. A massive armoire dominated the far corner, flanked by two small and decidedly delicate chairs. A rocking chair and accompanying small table filled another corner.

His gaze fell on the thick quilt she had rolled into a divider for the bed last night. The sound of her steady breathing had been a balm to his soul and lulled him into a deep sleep—the first he'd had in months.

Mathew leaned over and looked into the other parlor. The small couch where Ethan slept was empty. Panic rose again, only to be

tamped down when laughter from the far end of the house—the kitchen actually—reached him. He rolled out of the bed, scanning the room in a cursory search for his shirt. Unable to find the garment, he tugged his suspenders up and pulled the quilt off the bed.

Another laugh rolled through the house—and he had to catch his breath. Ethan was laughing.

He shook the quilt out and draped the bedding around his shoulders and made his way to the kitchen. With each step closer, the aroma of rich, strong coffee increased. He stumbled to a halt in the doorway, uncomfortably aware he wasn't clad enough to be seen by Abigail's guest. He stepped back, hoping he hadn't drawn anyone's attention.

No such luck. Abigail glanced in his direction, the smile breaking across her features as bright as the dawning sun. "Mathew. Good morning."

Ethan, Abigail's guest, and the other small boy sitting at the table all turned to the doorway. Both boys had a white powder on their lips, and they held what appeared to be a pastry of some sort.

"Good morning." Mathew pulled the quilt more tightly around his shoulders, keeping his left arm and hand hidden within the draping material. "If you'll excuse me, I'll wait in the parlor until your guests leave."

"Won't you join us, Dr. Knight?" The woman at the table gestured to a plate of the pastries. "I brought *café au lait* and beignets."

"Thank you but I have to decline. I'm afraid I'm not properly attired." He met Abigail's gaze across the room. "When you have a moment, will you please bring my shirt to me?"

"About your shirt...I scrubbed it, but the stains were set. I hung it to dry in the bathing room." Abigail stood and tilted her head toward the small room off the kitchen. "Molly brought over two shirts and a pair of black trousers that were her husband's. They don't fit Mr. Reed, but she thought they might be suited to you."

"Mr. Reed?"

Bright rose color flooded Molly's face. "Mr. Reed. He's been working for me at the restaurant as a cook, but he's more a chef. He's just brilliant with the foods he makes. How he does it with only one hand, I truly don't know."

The gentleman who stepped into the altercation with Roden... Mathew recalled the man who was about the same height but had a more substantial frame. "Thank you, again, Miss..."

He trailed off, not sure of her last name. She had a child, so perhaps he should have used "Mrs." And that still didn't answer the question of her last name.

She waved her hand in a gesture he recognized as an attempt to

minimize his formality. “Not ‘Miss’ anything. It’s Molly. You’re very welcome. I’m glad that someone can get some use out of the clothing. I’d hate to see practically new garments be turned into rags.”

Knowing there was nothing he could say that wouldn’t be either trite or impolite, Mathew just dipped his head to acknowledge her generosity and made his way back to Abigail’s bedroom. His pride smarted, that once more, he was reduced to accepting charity.

He threw the quilt onto the bed, grabbed up his low-topped boots and looked around for his socks. As with his shirt, they were nowhere to be seen. Had she taken those, too, to wash them? A groan broke from him as he sank into the rocking chair in the corner of the room. His gaze lowered to a spot on the floor, tracing the shape and whorls of a knot in a plank between his bare feet. He didn’t look up when he heard Abigail enter the room or when she set something on the small table at his elbow, though the aroma of the strong and bitter *café au lait* wafted to him.

“Mathew?”

His only response to Abigail’s soft query was a slight shake of his head.

“I brought you some coffee and a couple beignets.”

“Just coffee, please.” The knot continued to hold his attention. “Where are my socks?”

“When I got your shirt to wash it, I took your socks, too. After I washed them, I realized they needed darning.” The gurgling of coffee being poured underscored her words. “And, when I tried to darn them, it occurred to me they couldn’t be fixed.”

“They are my only pair.” Even he heard the growl in his voice.

A small click, a sound he recognized as a china cup being placed on a metal tray, gave way to a squeak. The doors of the armoire opening caught in the corner of his eye. The protest of wood grating on wood announced a drawer pulled out.

“One of the things some of us did to keep our hands busy and to keep from worrying—as much as we could stop worrying—was to knit socks to send to the Confederate troops that we were told had so very little. We didn’t get to send all of them.”

She dropped a pair of the discussed clothing onto his knee. He didn’t move. He couldn’t. To take those finely knit articles into his hand would be the final blow to his pride. The hem of her skirt blocked his view of the whorled knot in the floor, before she dropped to her knees in front of him. She took his hands into hers.

“I understand this must be incredibly difficult for you. You don’t strike me as the type of man who ever needed charity before that blasted war forced you into such straits.”

He raised his head in minute degrees until he met her gaze. The

pity he was expecting to see there was absent.

“The people here don’t have a lot of money, but what we do have is the same as you—pride. And a lot of it. Most of the folks here couldn’t pay Sam in cash. We never went hungry. Sam’s horse never went without shoes. His buggy got fixed every time something broke. I’ve always got at least a dozen eggs.” Her grip on his hands tightened. “Consider the clothing Molly brought over as payment in advance, in case she ever needs a doctor for Abe.”

“Roden was the first person I’ve treated in more than two years.” Mathew glanced at their joined hands, shocked he made that confession so easily. “I haven’t considered myself a doctor in almost four years. I couldn’t save those men who trusted me at Camp Douglas. During the war, I was little more than a butcher. Now, if I have to do surgery, I can’t. I can’t manage it with only one good hand.”

“You said last night you had nothing to treat those men at the prisoner camp. How could you save them if the Yankees gave you nothing? Because you had nothing to help those men in that prisoner camp didn’t make you any less a doctor, and I’ll bet it didn’t stop you from trying to keep them alive.” She shook her head in what he could only define as wry disbelief. “Saving a man’s life by amputating his arm or his leg makes you a butcher? I don’t think a butcher would know how to tie off veins and arteries to prevent a man bleeding to death after an amputation.”

Her words recalled the horrors of a battlefield surgical tent: the literal piles of amputated limbs, blood smelling like wet iron, sinking into mud created from all that blood ... and other bodily fluids which didn’t bear deep contemplation. His stomach had turned with each limb he removed. Worse was the recollection of a frigid December day along the Stones River. He’d used the excuse of trying to save a man’s life by pushing the intestines into the body, just so he could warm his own hands, stiff and unsteady with the cold. He’d needed warm hands to amputate a leg. He had justified the ghoulish behavior with the reasoning he couldn’t save the man with the belly wound, but he could save the one with the leg wound. Men were reduced by their wounds—not their names, not their rank, not even the side they fought for.

Abigail had no idea what kind of a monster he was. Not the kind who would ever harm a child, but one much worse. The kind who chose which men lived or died. He tried to extract his hands from hers, stopping when she gripped his fingers more tightly. “I let men die because there was nothing to be done for them.”

“That still doesn’t make you a butcher. Or a killer, like Robbie accused you of last night.” The accent she tried to keep hidden

sounded in her words. "I'll never forget the first letter Sam sent home. He wrote me he was horrified and sickened with the things he had to do after that first battle. He prayed God would forgive him for lying to a soldier with a gut-shot when he said that he was going to get better. He knew that man knew he was lying, but he was calmer after Sam said they was goin' to fix him. He said as long as he lived, he would hear their screams and hear those young men, not much more than boys, callin' for their mommas."

"I took an oath to do no harm." The choices he'd made, the selections of who lived and who died, crushed his soul with the gravity of those decisions.

"So did Sam. Did you deliberately end someone's life? Or did you make a bargain to lessen a dying man's pain so you could focus on saving the life of another?" If she heard how thick her accent had become, it didn't slow her words. "Because that's the devil's bargain Sam said he was forced to make again and again. You tell me, Mathew Knight, if that makes you any less a doctor."

A devil's bargain...that's exactly what it was every time he stood in surgery and deliberated who he could save and who he couldn't. He eased his breath out and said, "Sam was a lucky man."

"You're laughin' at me, ain't you?"

He shook his head. "I'm admiring your common sense."

"As long as you don't think I'm a backwoods cretin." The accent was suddenly quelled, as if she realized how heavily it colored her words.

"A cretin?" The faint aroma of vanilla and roses wafted from her hair when she snapped her head back to fully meet his gaze. Mathew leaned closer to her, noting the defiant sparks flashing in the cinnamon depths. The color washing over her face darkened the freckles smattering along the ridge of her cheekbones. "From the backwoods, yes, however, you are neither an imbecile nor are you suffering from a lack of intellectual capabilities due to a hereditary defect."

The smile lifting her lips appeared tenuous, at best.

He nudged his head toward the small table at his elbow. "Do I have time to drink a cup of coffee and savor a beignet before we have to leave for church services?"

Abigail released his hands and pushed herself to her feet. Her angry strides carried her to the door. "I'm not attending church this morning. Not after the manner Pastor Grisson accused you of being untruthful and then did not apologize for that unfounded accusation."

Her anger wasn't directed at him. Mathew leaned back in the rocker. "Then, I have plenty of time before I have to go to the jail to check on Mr. Roden as I told the sheriff I would be around after

church services.”

“How is he?” Abigail hesitated in the open doorway.

Mathew spooned sugar into the coffee. “The bullet grazed his buttock, little less than a flesh wound. He’ll make a full recovery. His pride, on the other hand, was seriously injured. I don’t have a course of treatment for such severely wounded conceit.”

“Well, now he’ll have a scar to go with his tall tales of serving with Hood and being injured, though it will be an interesting tale to explain how he got wounded.” Her soft laughter faded down the hall.

Mathew caught himself chuckling with her infectious laughter and forced his humor to bay. He shouldn’t be laughing. It was unprofessional. He pulled on one of the clean, white linen shirts that had belonged to Molly’s deceased husband. Better to dwell on the sobering cost to the widow who gave up her husband’s belongings.

How many men had this town lost? How many small towns in the south were like Brokken, bereft of their men? While he had noticed most of the women at the dance last night were partnered, the men all appeared to be courting the ladies. If he had to say for certain, the only men who weren’t mail-order grooms were the pastor, Yancy, and Roden.

He turned his gaze down the hall, toward the kitchen. They could have left, all these women in Brokken, though he admitted where they could have gone to after leaving the town would have been limited. Here, in their own town, they knew one another and could protect each other. They took over the professions and positions their husbands left vacant. In other towns, they would be restricted to the usual employment available for a woman—seamstress, laundress, maid, and a few other forms of employment that didn’t bear contemplation.

Mathew nodded to himself. Sending off for men to come to Brokken to fill those positions the women had been occupying and even for the men to become spouses had been a rather unique and intelligent solution, as intelligent and unique as his wife.

Chapter Thirteen

Abigail looked up from her coffee cup when Mathew entered the kitchen again, this time fully dressed and carrying the black doctor's satchel. He set the satchel on the counter. Without a word, he left the kitchen, walking in the direction of the front of the house.

Molly glanced across the table, a teasing grin dusting her lips. "He's not anything what Victoria thought he would look like."

Abigail couldn't contain her laugh. "Oh, my goodness. Did she tell you what she thought about why he didn't send a picture or a description of himself?"

"Um-hum." A deceptive innocence colored Molly's words. "I'll bet you were glad she was wrong."

Abigail sent a furtive glance up the hallway toward the parlor, grateful Mathew was out of earshot. She held her coffee cup between her hands, rubbing the pad of one thumb over the raised floral motif glazed onto the porcelain. She couldn't deny she was thankful Mathew wasn't anything as Victoria had teasingly envisioned. "Looks aren't everything. We both know that."

"You want to try to tell me you haven't thought at least once since he got here yesterday that he is mighty fine to look at." More of that deceptive innocence, coupled with another teasing grin.

"Molly!" Abigail nudged her head at the two boys sitting at the table, both of them devouring their third beignet. Her cheeks warmed with the recollection of her first impression of Mathew when she saw him at the train station. "Little pitchers..."

Mathew returned to the kitchen, this time carrying the tray Abigail had brought into the parlor earlier. He set the tray on the counter and carefully lowered the porcelain cup, saucer, and empty plate into the washbasin. Molly nodded in what Abigail could only define as approval. She didn't want to contemplate if that approval was for his consideration in bringing the service into the kitchen, his care with the porcelain, or the manner his frock coat defined the width of his shoulders, length of his back, and the trim of his waist. Realizing she was staring at the broad back by the sink, she dragged her gaze from Mathew and caught Molly's knowing grin.

Mathew turned from the washbasin, seeming oblivious to the interplay between the two women. "Thank you for the *café au lait* and the beignets."

"I can't take credit for the beignets. That was all Mr. Reed." Molly put her cup down and stood. She gathered Abe into her arms, grunting

a little with the effort. "I have to get back to the café. Abby, any time you want to bring Ethan over or want me to bring Abe here, just let me know."

Mathew picked up the doctor's bag. "Don't cut your visit short on my account. I have to see to Mr. Roden and then make a visit to Miss Melody's."

"Mr. Reed is alone in the kitchen and I feel guilty leaving him to do all the preparation for the after-church crowd by himself." Molly hesitated, and Abigail shook her head in warning with the sudden devilish expression that skipped across Molly's features. "Why don't I take Ethan with me for a little while? He and Abe can keep each other occupied, and then you can go with the doctor, Abby."

Before either she or Mathew could protest, Ethan scrambled off his chair and grabbed Molly's extended hand. Molly walked to the door. "I'll see you two in a little while."

Abigail turned Mathew. The dumbfounded expression on his face surely had to match her own. Several long, seemingly breathless seconds passed after Molly walked out until Mathew broke the tableau and gestured to the door. "Do we attend to Miss Melody's malaria patient or Mr. Roden's mortally wounded pride first?"

"I believe Mr. Roden's pride will wait."

Abigail guided Mathew through the open area between her home, Melody's barber shop, and the undertaker's. Mathew spared the undertaker's a cursory glance and said, "I never understood why it seems doctors feel they need to set up practice near a mortician."

A shudder rippled over Abigail. "I hate seeing those coffins on display in the front windows."

"It's nothing I enjoy seeing either," Mathew said. "They symbolize I've lost another battle."

Without breaking stride, Abigail looked up into his face. Distance darkened his eyes further and set his features into a chilly mask. "You take that battle personally."

"After all the losses I endured—and I have to remind myself the loss I suffered was only the loss of a patient, the patient lost his life—yes, I take that battle very personally. The longer I can forestall another coffin being put into use, the better I feel." The mask shattered when he glanced down at her. "This is a rather morbid conversation for such a bright and sunny day."

It rather was, but it also distracted Abigail from the equally somber contemplation of the empty houses they passed while making their way to Melody's small home on Austin Street. Two out of every three houses were empty, boarded up, with no indication their former occupants would ever return.

"How many families were here?"

“Before the war, about two hundred people lived in and around Brokken. There’s only about fifty people left now. More than half our menfolk didn’t return. Those who did, many didn’t want to stay.” Abigail looked at one of the empty houses. “A lot of the families who stayed and are trying to make a go of it can’t because of the taxes being levied on them.”

Mathew halted, and she followed his gaze up and down the street. His gaze settled on something she sensed wasn’t down the street, but much further away. “Why did you stay, Abigail?”

“Brokken is my home. Even if I wanted to return East, there’s nothing for me there. My family lives on the Virginia-Tennessee line in a small town. During the War, that town changed hands over one hundred times as the battle lines moved. What wasn’t nailed down was taken—by both Union and Confederate forces.” She settled her sight on an overgrown flower bed in the yard of what had been SaraBeth Kelly’s home, before Simon had died and SaraBeth had returned to her family in Baton Rouge. The orderly garden grew rank with weeds and several mesquite saplings. “The people here are my friends, and I promised I would stay. Why did you leave your home after the War?”

A panic-filled shout silenced any answer Mathew had.

“Miss Abby! Help! Miss Abby!”

Abigail turned toward her home. Alexander Jennings was as much as dragging his staggering, stumbling brother to the front porch of the home. She lifted her skirts and ran, the sound of Mathew’s hurried steps behind her.

Alexander pulled Aaron onto the porch, panting with exertion. Abigail caught Aaron in her arms and quickly assessed the younger of the Jennings brothers. Aaron’s lips had a blue tint and every breath rattled and wheezed as he struggled to pull in air.

“What happened?” she asked as she lowered him to the floor.

Mathew stopped her, sliding his arms under Aaron’s. “In the house.”

Abigail lifted Aaron’s legs, following Mathew into the front parlor. The young man reached for his neck, clawing at his skin as if he could open his throat. Alexander rushed behind Abigail, the words tumbling from him in a rush. “We was fishing. Caleb Cantwell showed up. He knows Aaron’s plumb yeller when it comes to hornets—”

“He has every right to be afraid of them.” A sinking dread filled her stomach.

“There was a hornet’s nest over us, but they wasn’t bothering us, and we wasn’t bothering them. Cantwell threw a handful of rocks at the nest. We ran but Aaron’s slower than me and he got stung.”

Mathew met her gaze. “He’s having a severe reaction. Let’s get him

up onto the bar top.”

Aaron continued to wheeze, each breath sounding as if it came with greater difficulty. Alexander hung back, his face pale with fear.

Mathew snapped open the black bag, pulling out the syringes and the length of tubing she had seen Sam use once to give fluids to old man Fenton when he had heat prostration. “I need whiskey,”

Whiskey? What in the name of heaven did he need that for?

“And if you’ve been keeping morphine held back for an emergency, this is it.”

Alexander pulled a silver flask from the back pocket of his patched and tattered overalls, extending the small container to Mathew. “Don’t tell the pastor.”

Mathew shook his head. “I won’t.”

Abigail stood frozen. Aaron’s struggles to pull in a breath increased. Mathew spared him a moment to murmur, “It’s going to be all right. Try to relax,” before he leveled a frigid glare at Abigail.

“Abigail. I need the morphine now, if you have it.”

The cold precision in Mathew’s voice and actions broke her immobility. She shook her head. “I’ve only got laudanum.”

“Damn.” Mathew shoved his good hand through his hair and bent over Aaron. He pressed his thumb into the bend of Aaron’s elbow, nodded to himself, then pulled off his own tie, and wrapped it tightly around Aaron’s upper arm. “Laudanum won’t get into his system fast enough.”

Aaron drummed his heels in his desperate fight for air.

“Hold him down. I’ve got to get this whiskey directly into a vein.”

Abigail and Alexander jumped to hold Aaron.

After injecting what she was certain was enough whiskey to knock out a horse, Mathew pressed his fingertips to the young man’s pulse under his ear. “His heart rate is slowing a little. Abigail, I need a funnel. If you have one that has never been used with camphine, it would be better. The bottom of the funnel ideally should be about as big around as your thumb.”

Aaron was still struggling to breathe, though he seemed calmer. It was a side effect of the immediate state of inebriation, Abigail thought, as she rummaged under the bar for the funnel she used to add ingredients together for her tinctures. She handed it to Mathew. Unlike Sam, though Mathew’s actions were quick, he seemed neither hurried nor frantic. There was measured authority to his haste.

“Perfect. Get the scalpel and the trocar out and pour some of the whiskey over both instruments and the small end of the funnel. Pour it through the funnel, too.” Mathew swiped his forearm across his brow.

She rummaged through his doctor’s bag, trying to remember what a trocar was. Sam had told her, hadn’t he? What had he said it looked

like? Why wasn't her brain functioning? She didn't panic in emergencies. That was why Sam said she was so much help.

"Metal instrument, pointy end, elongated pyramid-shape," Mathew muttered, gesturing for her to find it.

There it was. She grabbed it and the scalpel and drenched the implements with the alcohol. As soon as she poured some through the funnel, Mathew took the small flask from her and poured the remaining whiskey over his hands.

Alexander winced with the wasted liquor but didn't say anything.

Mathew sucked in a slow, deep breath and let it ease out. "Abigail, put one hand under his head, at the base of his skull, and the other on his chin. Tilt his head back until I tell you to stop, and then whatever you do, don't let him move. You," he said, nudging his head at Alexander, "hold his shoulders down. Lie across him if you have to but try not to put too much weight on his chest. He's having a hard-enough time breathing."

She had never been squeamish at the sight of blood, but when Mathew punched the trocar into Aaron's throat, her head swam, and her stomach did flipflops. Abigail closed her eyes and focused on the sound of her own breathing.

"Don't you go getting the vapors on me, Abigail." The cool authority in his voice pushed the dizziness into retreat.

A deep, whistling breath from Aaron snapped her eyes open. Mathew tugged on the back of Alexander's shirt, gesturing for him to let go of his brother's shoulders. Aaron sucked in another deep breath through the funnel, his color quickly improving from a ghastly blue-gray. A few drops of blood slowly crept down the side of his neck and under any other circumstances, the sight of her funnel protruding from his throat would have horrified her.

Aaron opened his eyes, a drunken and lopsided grin spreading over his face. He opened his mouth and closed it when Mathew softly said, "Don't try to talk. You can't right now. Don't move, either. It's going to be a little while before the swelling in your throat reduces."

Abigail shook her head, trying to clear the growing black spots in her vision. To her horror, her legs were suddenly as sturdy as a newborn kitten's. She felt Mathew's arms close around her when her knees buckled. The last thing she heard as everything faded into darkness was his soft whisper, "I've got you."

Chapter Fourteen

Mathew swept Abigail's limp form into his arms. He paused long enough to bark at what he assumed to be the older brother, "Don't you let him move."

"No, sir. I won't."

Mathew carried Abigail into the bedroom and eased her into the mattress. The smelling salts were in the other room. He shook his head and decided to wait for a couple of minutes and see if she came around without them. She breathed normally, and though the color had initially drained from her face, a healthy tint was already sweeping across her cheeks.

He sat on the edge of the bed and lifted her hand, finding the pulse in her wrist as a matter of habit. The steady and slow beat thrummed under his fingertip.

Abigail stirred, her eyelids fluttering. She opened her eyes with a gasp and tried to sit up, ceasing the attempt when Mathew gently held her shoulder down. "I'm so sorry."

"Because you had the vapors?" Mathew allowed himself a smile. "You're not the first surgical assistant I've had who passed out. Though I admit, you're a sight more attractive than a burly, bearded orderly. I never bothered to put one of them into a comfortable bed, either, just stretched them out on the floor until they came to."

Her cheeks flooded a bright rose. "How's Aaron?"

Mathew twisted his head over his shoulder, years of practice allowing him to quickly note Aaron's steady, deep breathing. He'd operated in a lot of places during the war—kitchen tables of homes commandeered by the Confederacy to serve as operating theaters, barns, even in a church once, but on a bar top in a former bawdy house was a first. "Breathing evenly and I'm going to guess he's passed out drunk. He's going to have one massive headache when he wakes up."

Abigail pushed up onto her elbows. "How did you manage to think clearly enough to even do any of that?"

"It's much easier to think when there aren't bullets flying and grape shot exploding all around." He allowed himself another smile. "The alcohol was a shot in the dark, but the way his heart was pounding, it was worth trying. As to cutting into someone's windpipe, as rapidly as his throat was swelling shut, it was his only chance to keep an open airway."

"Is he going to be all right?" She sat up a little straighter.

Mathew steadied her with a hand on her elbow. "As long as he doesn't get stung again, he should be fine. I'll wait a while before I remove our improvised airway."

He startled when she grabbed his left arm. Her gaze darted from his face to his hand and back again. "If you weren't here, Aaron would be dead. I know it's only been a day—and we agreed to a trial period—but you can't leave. Please, don't leave."

He didn't attempt to extract his withered arm from her grasp. Had it truly only been a day? He skimmed his gaze over her, then turned his attention to the drunken young man passed out in the other room, and finally to that young man's brother hovering attentively over him. He lingered for a long pause on the detailed glass work of the transom over the door joining the two parlors. Greens, yellows, and blues created a riot of tangled, twisting ivy.

When had he lost his heart to her? When she crawled under the table to soothe and comfort Ethan? Or when a protectiveness a mother bear would envy emerged with her perception of how Ethan's very soul had been abused? Maybe it happened when she didn't look away from his useless left hand and arm. The struggle to articulate those thoughts knotted his gut.

He brought his gaze to her hand on his arm, again, the pressure of her grasp not much more than the weight of a feather, her fingers a stark contrast to the black of his coat, and then at last, to her face. That strand of hair had escaped her braid again. He tucked the wayward tress behind her ear, extracted his arm, and stood. "The minute everyone in this town realized I didn't stay at the hotel, leaving wasn't an option. The older of those two—" He jerked his head over his shoulder at the brothers.

"Alexander," she whispered, her expression seeming to be crestfallen and the light in her eyes dimmed.

"—needs to keep his brother quiet until I get back. I'm going to see Mr. Roden, then have the sheriff give me directions to Miss Melody's, and on my way back, I'll get Ethan from the café." Mathew bent to her and left a kiss against her forehead. "I want you to stay off your feet."

"Mathew, if you're staying here because of what the gossips might say, I've listened to worse. You don't have to stay with me, but please, stay in Brokken."

He halted in the doorway. A small voice in the back of his head whispered he was a fool when the only words he could force out were, "I'm not leaving."

Alexander stood with folded arms near his brother. "You better not ruin Miss Abby's reputation, or you're gonna answer to me."

"I will be mindful and cautious with my wife's reputation." Mathew dipped his head to acknowledge the young man's warning. "If

he wakes up before I get back, don't let him move."

As he walked across the small open area between the former brothel and the jail, Mathew berated himself. Why couldn't he tell Abigail leaving was no longer an option because it would tear his heart out? He wasn't staying because of the gossips, or because he worried about her reputation, though that did nudge his conscience. As much as he hated to admit it, even wanting a home for Ethan wasn't the reason.

That small voice reminded him he was being a fool. Everything he'd thought he'd lost and was unattainable was within his reach. A growl of disgust aimed at himself silenced the voice.

He pushed open the door of the ugly, squat building. The sheriff sat behind a battered old desk, her booted feet propped on the desktop. She nodded a greeting and said, "Coffee's hot if you want any."

"Thank you, no." He set Sam's bag on the desk next to Roden's holstered revolver and turned his attention to the gun's owner.

Roden glared at him. "I ain't dropping my drawers so you can have a look."

Mathew lifted his shoulders in a shrug and picked up the bag. "If you're comfortable with possible infections, maybe gangrene, I'm fine with it."

"I have to turn him loose, Doc." Victoria sat up in the chair and dropped her feet to the floor with a thud. "Sent a telegram to a friend who's a judge, and he can't find any law says he can't pull a gun. I could probably charge him with public intoxication because of the laudanum, but I can't charge him for acting like a total fool."

"I don't think Mr. Roden, and I will have any more problems." Mathew pulled the door open and paused. "I need to see the gentleman at Miss Melody's home. How do I find her house?"

"That's easy. She's the fourth house on the right on Austin Street." Victoria walked to the cell, the large ring of keys jangling with each step she took. "I heard Alexander yelling a little while ago for Abby. What was that all about?"

"Aaron was stung." Mathew hastened to add, "He's going to be fine."

"That's good. Those boys have come a long way in the past couple of months, ever since Deborah Brokken took them under her wing." The harsh squeal of a key turning in the lock underscored her words. "Seems Deborah found a calling in life—reforming delinquent boys."

Roden shoved the unlocked cell door and grabbed his holster and revolver off the sheriff's desk. Victoria snapped, "You can strap that iron on when you get out of town, Robbie. Not before then."

Roden turned his glare to Mathew, and then blew out a short

breath in a derisive huff. “Whatever you say, *Sheriff*.”

Before he could make good an escape, Mathew grabbed the back of Roden’s cut-away coat, stopping the much younger man. “We aren’t going to have any problems, are we, Mr. Roden?”

“No problems at all,” Roden said with a smile that was more bared-tooth snarl than anything else. A chill skittered the length of Mathew’s spine.

He watched the younger man pause in the middle of the street as if getting his bearings before he struck out in an unerring path toward Molly’s café. The chill he’d experienced a few seconds before returned, only stronger, deeper. “Sheriff, would you do me a favor?”

“An official favor?”

Mathew twisted his head over his shoulder. “Official. My son is at Molly’s café with Abe. Would you go to the café and wait for me to get Ethan in a bit?”

Victoria grabbed her hat from the coat tree next to the door. “I’ve got a strong hankering for some of those beignets I heard Mr. Reed makes. You go assure Melody that Gideon isn’t going to die, and I’ll help Molly prevent the boys from tearing the café down.”

“Thank you.”



ABIGAIL SAT ON THE glider on the front porch, a light shawl wrapped around her shoulders. The peace and calm that settled over the town with the darkness didn’t extend to her tangled thoughts. The more she attempted to puzzle out the day’s events, the more tangled her thoughts grew.

When Mathew returned with Ethan in tow, a noticeable edge lined Mathew’s words. A bright sparkle of something that bordered on fear lit the depths of his eyes if Ethan strayed out of his sight. Though it was against her better judgment, he wouldn’t even tolerate Ethan out of his sight when he tended to Aaron.

Calvin Meyers had willingly ridden his little mule out to the Brokken Arrow Ranch with news of what had happened to Aaron. Isaac showed up on the front porch a little while later with Deborah Brokken. While Deborah waited in the gleaming black buggy, Isaac, Deborah’s foreman, had assisted Aaron from the house and drove the two Jennings brothers to the Brokken Arrow.

Her thoughts turned to how Mathew had handled the emergency with Aaron. Sam had been a good doctor and a good surgeon. The few crises she had seen Sam deal with, his actions had a sense of alarmed haste. On the other hand, Mathew’s precision was controlled and coolly calm, relaxed even, though she knew he hadn’t been relaxed at all. The well-being of her friends and neighbors would be in capable

hands with Mathew. And, yet, there was still disappointment thrumming through her. She didn't want a marriage that was loveless.

As if anyone could admit to being in love after only one day...Abigail pulled in hard on that thought. Hadn't she lost her heart to Ethan in a matter of minutes? To be honest, it wasn't just Ethan she'd lost her heart to.

It took years for Sam to ever say he loved her. In the beginning of her marriage to Sam, there had been anger. Sam never mistreated her, and even though he had married her to save his honor, he accused her of trapping him. At least, there wouldn't be that between her and Mathew. Guilt ate her conscience, as searing as a strong acid, for once more comparing the two men.

"May I join you?"

Abigail startled when Mathew interrupted her thoughts. She quickly composed herself and looked to the open front door. "Of course."

The aroma of strong coffee preceded him. Wordlessly, he handed a cup to her and settled himself on the glider. The silence wasn't comfortable, but it didn't feel strained, either. Instead, it was as if they both sought a manner to begin a conversation.

"I'm sor—"

"What happ—"

They started talking and fell silent at the same time. A soft chuckle broke from him and she couldn't halt her smile. Abigail gestured to him in a conceding manner.

Mathew shook his head. "Ladies first."

She set her coffee on the small table next to the glider and asked, "What happened when you went to the jail?"

The lines of his face tightened and his whole posture altered and stiffened. "Nothing." The cold in his voice was enough to frost the air.

Abigail pulled her shawl more tightly over her shoulders against that chill. "Something happened."

He shook his head again. "That's just it. Nothing happened but..."

Abigail let the silence sit when he trailed off. His gaze settled across the street, and she took the opportunity to study his profile. He had shed his frock coat and tie. The collar of his shirt was opened, and the sleeves rolled back to mid-forearm. That he felt comfortable enough with her to uncover his left arm spoke volumes. The furrowing of his brow was visible even in profile.

Somewhere in the hills around the town, a coyote yodeled and barked. Another soon answered. Old man Fenton's chickens were probably on the menu. The coffee at her elbow coiled a faint tendril of steam into the unseasonably chilly air.

He drank from his own steaming cup and then said, "I don't trust

Roden.”

Abigail moved closer to Mathew and pulled her hand down his upper arm. He hadn't been rattled when Robbie pushed a gun into his chest, but something had been said or done earlier when Mathew went to the jail. Whatever it was had unnerved him.

He leaned forward and set his cup on the floor at his feet. A long breath eased from him as he tilted his head. “He refused to let me treat his wound anymore, and when the sheriff released him—”

“Vic let him go? Why?” Abigail jerked her head back. Sudden cold knots twisted in her stomach. The yelping of the coyotes changed to excited yapping and barking. Their hunt was over, and the pack was celebrating. A shiver that started in her twisted gut rippled through her.

“To paraphrase the sheriff, it's not illegal to act like a total fool.” A wry grin twisted up a corner of his mouth. “He did nothing against the law. She had no reason to keep him behind bars, and when she cut him loose, he went straight to Molly's café.”

The knots in her stomach multiplied and grew. “Ethan.” The child's name slipped from her lips on little more than a frightened whisper. Abigail shook herself with the immediate surge of anger and protectiveness that washed over her. “Did he do anything to Ethan?”

“No. I saw where he was going and asked the sheriff to wait at the café until I could get him.” He turned on the seat to fully face her. “I should have told you this when I first got back here this morning and trusted you enough to understand.”

She heard the apology in his words, even if he didn't say the two simple words. The furrowing of his brow eased when she leaned closer to him and traced the strong line of his jaw with her fingertips. “Trust takes time to build. We have time, Mathew.”

Something woke him from a sound sleep. Mathew rolled onto his back, listening to the sounds he had become accustomed to. Nothing out of the ordinary, but he was unable to fall back to sleep. He folded his arms under his head and stared at the high ceiling of the bedroom, allowing his thoughts to wander as they wished.

Brokken had been home for two weeks. Time allowed him to settle into a routine, something Mathew would admit had been sorely lacking from his life for the past few years, and especially in the previous six months.

He had never been an early riser, though life in the Confederate forces had required it of him, as had life with Ethan. Abigail, on the other hand, was up before the sun. Every morning, he woke to the scent of brewing coffee and whatever she prepared for breakfast. Yesterday, his morning had started with pancakes, eggs, bacon, and fried potatoes.

Under her care, Ethan had sprouted at least an inch, and his much too thin frame had started to fill out. Ethan was talking more, too, and no longer in broken sentences. More importantly, his son's confidence grew as much as his little body. He seldom cowered in fear, and his laughter was a common sound in the house. Just that night, Abigail had convinced Ethan to take a bath by making it a game.

His gaze fell onto the quilt that had marked the division of the bed for a grand total of two nights. Pastor Grisson's hints they should repeat their vows within the church had become less and less subtle over the intervening two weeks. Abigail steadfastly refused to set foot in the small church or even speak to the preacher until Grisson apologized to him. Mathew tried to point out the preacher's hints were Grisson's manner of offering an apology, but Abigail was having none of it. Unless and until the preacher actually said the words, he was wrong to have accused Mathew of being a liar, as far as Abigail was concerned, they were married enough by the proxy.

Mathew pulled his hand down his face. If they were married enough by the proxy, why did he feel as if there was still a line of demarcation through the middle of the bed as defined as the Mason-Dixon divided North from South? His sight shifted to the woman sleeping with her back to him, her form washed in the pale silver of moonlight.

A soft, almost inaudible whimper sounded from her, and she thrust a hand out in her sleep, her fingers grasping at the air. Another tiny

cry broke the silence. Mathew leaned over and gently stroked her shoulder, not wanting to wake her but hoping to interrupt whatever ghosts disturbed her sleep.

Abigail turned to him, flinging her arms around his torso and burying her face against his chest. With a muffled sob, her tears fell. He enfolded her in his embrace, startled with the violent trembling that shook her.

"I had the most awful dream," she said, her voice thick with sleep and tears. "You went away and didn't come back. I was so alone."

Sam. She'd been dreaming about Sam.

Mathew inhaled sharply and stiffened. The longing in her voice shouldn't have the power to lance through him, shouldn't constrict his chest so much he couldn't force his next breath free. He disentangled himself from her embrace, and even though he wanted to shove her away from him, he reined in enough on the pain to gently push her back.

Abigail sat up, her eyes widening as she slipped free of the last tendrils of sleep.

"Mathew."

His name slipped from her on a whisper. He ground his teeth together to keep any response corralled. She leaned closer to him, reaching for him again. He caught her shoulders, stopping her from sliding her arms around him with a curt shake of his head.

Without a word, he swung his legs out of the bed and stood.

"Where are you going?"

He shook his head again as he pulled on his shirt. "I don't know."

"I was dreaming. I didn't—"

"Abigail, stop." He walked to the open doorway and paused.

"Don't try to explain it. You'll just make it worse."

He made his way through the dark and silent house and then out onto the back porch. A robin twittered sleepily from the mesquite tree next to the house. The eastern skies drew his attention as he sank to sit on the top step. The first faint blush of dawn edged the distant horizon, the color becoming more intense and fiery with each passing second. The old adage about a red sky in the morning nudged his memory, but he couldn't recall if it meant a change was coming or storms were approaching. He supposed it really didn't matter because he couldn't change the weather.

"Mathew."

His closed his eyes and lowered his head. A rustle of fabric told him she sat next to him.

"I was dreaming."

"Don't." He didn't open his eyes or raise his head. He couldn't change this either. He couldn't stop the pain rending his heart

knowing it was a man who had been dead for four years she still dreamed of.

“I have to tell you—”

“No, you don’t.” He put his hands on his knees, to push himself to stand. Her slender hand closed on his elbow and he hesitated. “You’re still in love with him, Abigail. I won’t compete with the memory of a dead man for your affections.”

Her hand fell away, and he stood. He looked at the eastern horizon again. Half the sky appeared to be glowing with the fires from a blacksmith’s forge. “An annulment at this stage is an impossibility.”

A soft gasp broke from her. “Mathew—”

“I can’t file for a divorce because there technically hasn’t been any infidelity.” He pulled his gaze from the angry red skies and finally looked at her. “But, if it’s all the same to you, I’ll move into one of the upstairs bedrooms. I’d prefer to not sleep with the ghost of your first husband.”

She shot to her feet. Anger sparkled in her eyes, turning the cinnamon color into amber. “I live with her ghost every moment of every day. You can’t tell me every time you look at Ethan, you don’t see her.” She took a step closer to him, jabbing her finger into his chest. “I wasn’t dreaming about Sam, Mathew Knight. At first, I thought it was Sam I was trying to catch up to in the rain, but he was never as tall as the man in my dream. Sam didn’t have dark hair, either.”

“You were dreaming about me?” Even he heard the disbelief and scathing derision in his words.

“Why do you doubt that? Once, I did love Sam with all my heart, and he will always be a part of my past. My past, Mathew. My past.” She backed away, the fight draining from her. “I’ll start breakfast, so you can get to the homesteads outside of town and back before the storms hit later today.”

She walked into the house, her demeanor defeated and crushed.

Mathew watched the sunrise, blaming the bright light for the burning in his eyes. She hadn’t said Sam’s name when she woke. He blinked, the imprint of the rising sun leaving a shadow in his vision. A long, slow breath eased from him. There were too many ghosts in this house. He couldn’t live with one of them, and he didn’t know how to evict the other.



ETHAN LOOKED UP AT her, his expression the very definition of pleading. “Can I go with Abe and Mr. Reed?”

“Please, Miz, Bailey, can Ethan go with us?” Abe asked. Abigail didn’t correct him on the use of her former name.

Thomas Reed gestured toward the other side of town. "Abe's been telling me about the fishing over in the Brokken Creek and Northview Lake. Figured we'd go wet a few lines and drown some worms. I'll have him back before supper."

She looked down the street toward Molly's café. "Mathew is seeing to patients well outside of town, but he should be back in a few hours. I was going to take Ethan with me to collect plants."

A long sigh broke from the boy. "I want to go fishing," Ethan grumbled.

If Ethan went with Reed and Abe, it would give her some time to restock her medicinal plants. She wasn't about to capitulate quite so easily though after his outburst. Abigail slanted a glare down to him and he added, "Please."

She made it appear she was considering refusing. Then, she nodded. "If Mathew or I aren't here when you return with Ethan, Mr. Reed, will you take him to the café and one of us will bring him home from there?"

Reed nodded. "They can keep each other occupied and out from under foot at the café."

"Can I go?" Ethan asked again.

"You have to promise that you'll be careful." Abigail adjusted Ethan's overalls, and smoothed the unruly cowlick on the back of his head. "And, you'll mind Mr. Reed."

"I promise." Ethan squirmed away from her.

She grabbed his shoulders before he made good his escape and kissed the top of his head. "Bring home a big fish, and I'll cook it for your supper."

Ethan ran from the porch, took an offered cane pole from Abe, and fell in step behind Reed. Though Abe was half a year older than Ethan, the boys were the same height. With the poles slung over their shoulders, traipsing barefooted along the dusty street, they could be mistaken for brothers.

A renewed sadness filled Abigail. Even if Mathew hadn't taken up residence that morning in one of the upstairs bedrooms, she would never be able to give Ethan a sibling. She gave herself a hard, mental shake. That kind of thinking did nothing but add to the sense of defeat.

She picked her basket up off the glider, made sure her scissors, small hand-held shovel, and gloves were in the wicker depths, and marched off the porch. She had plants to gather for tinctures and poultices. Wild licorice grew along the stream bed by the Davis's old place. She'd start there.

By the time she reached the abandoned homestead, sweat soaked her shirtwaist, and she regretted not having her hair pulled up off her

neck. Each breath felt as if she was breathing through a warm, damp towel. Rain crows cooed and serenaded one another from the brush. Along the creek side, it sounded as if every frog and toad in the whole state was croaking in a determined effort to drown out all other sounds.

She glanced up at the sky and briefly considered going back home.

The clouds built on themselves, towering into the deep blue sky, looking like so many bolls of cotton piled on one another. Their undersides were flattening and growing darker even as she watched them rise higher and higher.

Everything said rain was coming: the deep, fiery sunrise, the mournful calls of the rain crows, the cacophony of the frogs and toads, the way the trees curled and turned their leaves up, the growing thickness and darkness of the clouds, even the way she felt as if every hair stood on end. Her skin crawled with agitation and anticipation.

Abigail paused before going to the banks of the small creek, peering intently into the thick brush. Her run-in with a cougar a few months before in this same place urged caution. She shook her head, not sure if she was amused or horrified with Deborah Brokken's reaction when Deborah had seen the same big cat a day or so later. Deborah viewed the animal as some sort of spirit guide or a sign from on high and had practically begged for the animal to be left alone. Deborah seemed to think the cougar was an over-grown house cat.

Her scrutiny of the underbrush didn't reveal any sign of Deborah's kitty. If the cougar had any sense at all, it was sleeping away the heat of the day in a cool, dark place. Abigail made her way to the creek to harvest fresh, young, wild licorice shoots.

She wasn't sure how long she had been on the creek bank, but she found not only the licorice, but several rhizomes of sweet flag, harvested several armfuls of willow shoots, and even a small stand of black cohosh. Splashing in the creek interrupted her attempt to identify another rhizome. Mistaking sweet flag for blue flag would have fatal consequences.

She looked up, shocked at how diffused the light was and how very strange it looked—as if the sunlight itself was bracing against incoming storms.

Caleb Cantwell rode down the middle of the creek, his ancient mule slipping more than once on the slick rocks of the bed. He reined the mule to a stop and tipped the brim of his tattered straw hat. "Miz Abby."

She spared him a nod and began gathering up her plants. A faint, far-distant growl of thunder reached her.

"Robbie asked me to find you." Cantwell spoke with a slow deliberation, as if he had memorized what Robbie wanted him to say.

“He said he has something of yours, and he’ll give it to you, but you have to come to his house.”

The darkening horizon drew her gaze. “Whatever it is, it’s going to have to wait until tomorrow. It’ll be storming by the time I get home.” She secured the willow branches into one bundle and placed them over the roots and rhizomes in the basket.

Cantwell seemed at a loss with that answer. Abigail allowed herself a rueful sigh. “Tell Robbie I’ll see him tomorrow.”

“But, Miz Abby, I promised Robbie I’d bring you to his house.”

Abigail lifted the basket, noting it was much heavier than when she started. “Unless you plan to throw me across the back of that mule like a sack of feed, you aren’t bringing me to his house today. I’m going home.” She paused as another low growl of thunder intruded. “You need to get home, too, or you’re going to be caught out in that storm.”

She climbed up the creek bank, leaving a perplexed looking Caleb sitting motionless in the middle of the small stream. A glance over her shoulder forced another sigh from her. “Caleb, go home.”

She didn’t wait to see if he did as she told him.

The thunder rolled louder and longer when she was less than halfway to town, and lightning visibly flickered in the northwestern skies. A scan of the horizon quickened her steps. This storm looked angry, as if all the pent-up anger in the whole world had been scooped up by the strong winds and used to fashion the black, roiling clouds.

As usual, she paused on the rise just outside of town and swept her gaze over the small town. The activity outside of her house gave her pause. Sam’s old buggy hadn’t been returned to the livery, and if she was seeing correctly, nearly every horse, mule, wagon and buggy that hadn’t been taken by the two armies during the war were hitched to the rail in front of the house. She’d seen the like once before in front of Otis Beehman’s home when little Emily Beehman vanished after playing along the banks of Lighter Knot Creek.

Her home was being used as a starting point for a search party.

Ethan. Her heart faltered. She threw a glance at Brokken Creek, icy dread suffocating her.

She lifted her skirts and ran down the rise, stumbling and sliding. Her steps quickened on the road, until she ran as fast as she could.

Numb. It was the only word Mathew could even think of to describe what Reed's stumbling explanation made him feel. Numb all the way to the depths of his very soul.

Reed said Ethan was fishing with Abe and him and had wandered upstream. About the time Reed heard the first distant rumble of thunder, Abe shouted that Ethan's pole was drifting down the creek. After a frantic, fruitless search, Reed sent Abe for Victoria while he continued searching for the boy.

He lifted his head to the front door when Abigail burst into the house and was caught by the sheriff. Victoria said something to her, and she crumbled against the doorjamb. She slowly lifted her face to him and met his gaze across the room. The anguish lining her face was palpable.

At least one of them could feel something. Before the thought fully formed, a boiling rage washed over Mathew. He shoved his way through the men and women gathered in the parlor to begin the search for Ethan. Abigail shied away from him when he grabbed her arm and shook her.

"This is your fault. You let him go, and you weren't there to watch him."

"Mathew!"

He heard Victoria's warning snap of his name, but he was beyond caring. His son was missing. Missing because Abigail hadn't been there to watch him. The color drained from her face and she shook her head. He didn't know what she was denying, and he didn't care. "If anything has happened to him..."

He let the threat trail off.

"If it's anyone's fault, Doc, it's mine." Reed closed the distance across the large parlor. "I shouldn't have let him out of my sight."

A loud crack of thunder made everyone in the room startle. Victoria pulled Abigail away from him, and then said, her voice brusque and full of authority, "This won't help us find Ethan. We've got a lot of ground to cover before that storm fully gets here. Thomas, you and Molly start looking again along the east side of Brokken Creek. Melly, you and Gabriel, take the west side." She continued to give instructions to the gathered townsfolk.

Mathew slid a glare at Abigail. She still leaned against the doorjamb, her features drained of color, her lower lip trembling, and her teeth chattering. She clutched a basket of weeds to her chest, and

when she dipped her head, tears tracked her cheeks.

“Make sure you’ve got a raincoat and a lamp full of oil with you. If you find him,” Victoria finished up, “fire three shots. Let’s go, people. That storm isn’t going to wait for us.”

Mathew took a step toward the door, halting when Victoria grabbed his useless arm.

“You stay here.”

“He’s my son.” Mathew jerked his arm loose of her restraint.

“I’m very aware of whose son he is. And, you won’t do him a lick of good in the dark, rushing all over the place. You don’t know the terrain. Molly, Melly, Gwynn, Yank, Lavender, me—we all know the area. You’re just as apt to get as lost as Ethan is and then we’ll be looking for the both of you.” Victoria nudged her head toward Abigail. “Stay with her.”

What Victoria said made sense, but it didn’t do a thing to lessen the anger over-riding the numbness in his soul. He watched with helpless frustration as the searchers swung onto horses or stepped up into wagons and buggies. He turned his attention to Abigail.

She continued to require support from the doorjamb, the basket of wilting weeds clutched tightly to her breast, staring into the fading plants.

“If anything happens to him—”

“I’ll never forgive myself.” Her small whisper cut him off. “I shouldn’t have let him go with Mr. Reed and Abe. He was so happy they stopped to ask if he could go with them, I didn’t think—”

“He’s only four. He can’t swim. He doesn’t know anything about being safe around a running stream.” Mathew shoved a hand through his hair and tried to rein in his anger. “How deep is that stream?”

Abigail finally lifted her head to meet his gaze.

Mathew’s throat tightened with the agony darkening her eyes. He reined in further on his anger. This wasn’t her fault, no matter who he wanted to blame. No one was at fault. Everything he wanted for Ethan had happened here, with her—and how many young boys went fishing with a friend on a warm sunny afternoon? “How deep is Brokken Creek?”

The last remnant of color drained from her face. “It’s deep—over my head in a lot of places—and fast. It feeds Northview Lake.” The basket fell to the floor, the plants spilling from its depths. “Mathew, I’m so sorry.”

He stepped through the scattered weeds and twigs and pulled her into his embrace. Her arms slipped around his neck even as she crumbled against him, an anguished sob tearing from her. He turned his gaze out the opened door into the rapidly darkening afternoon and the almost constant lightning creating macabre shadows that writhed

in the street.

One of the shadows separated itself from the others, and Pastor Grisson strode onto the porch. Without a word of greeting, the pastor walked into the house and placed a hand on Mathew's opposite shoulder. Mathew kept his arm around Abigail's back.

"I'm useless in the dark. I can't see a thing," Grisson said. Mathew's tenuous hold on his emotions slipped. Grisson's hand tightened on his shoulder. "But, I'm very good with waiting. Abigail, I know you've been angry with me, and you have a right to be."

Mathew put a little distance between himself and the pastor without removing his embrace of Abigail. "What does this have to do with finding my son?"

Abigail's breath hitched into a muted sob.

"Nothing." Grisson pushed Abigail closer to Mathew. "And everything. Some time ago, Mathew, your wife admonished me to be a shepherd and to set the example for this town. I have failed to do that. I failed most miserably when I thought I could wait Abigail out. If she returned to church, I could save my pride and offer you an apology on her return."

Mathew stepped away from his wife and the pastor. "You picked a pretty bad time to try to apologize."

"I didn't come to apologize."

Abigail's head snapped up. "Then what are you doing here?"

"I owe Mathew an apology, Abigail. You are very correct about that." Grisson lowered his gaze to the floor for what felt like an eternity. He looked to Mathew. "I publicly made a baseless accusation, and I've listened to gossip and rumors. I owe you a public apology. But, I said I'm good at waiting. That seems to be all we three can do right now. Wait, and pray."

Abigail's spine stiffened, and her head twisted in degrees toward the open door. "Get—"

Mathew caught her arm at the elbow, pulling her to him. "Abby, no. Please, don't throw him out."

She looked up at him. Fury and worry vied for the other in her expression and burned her tears dry. A less than steady breath eased the tight lines in her face. Another long moment passed as the rigidity to her posture softened. Then, she nodded.

"Pastor," Mathew said.

Grisson again caught Mathew's shoulder and draped an arm around Abigail's back. He bent his head. "Dear Lord, we know how dear children are in Your sight. Your Son told His disciples to suffer the little children to come unto Him—"

Abigail harshly inhaled.

"—Ethan is lost. Keep Your eye on this precious child, just as You

keep Your eye on the sparrow. Defend, protect, and guard him, until our rescuers find him. We ask this in the name of Your Son, our Lord and Savior.”

“Disciples.” Abigail shoved free of both Mathew’s embrace and the arm Grisson draped over her. “I know where Ethan is.”

Before Mathew could say anything, she spun around and raced out the door. Mathew hesitated for a moment. “Stay here, Pastor. Your daughter told the searchers to fire three shots if they found him.”

He caught Abigail at the hitching rail as she backed the horse up to turn the buggy clear. “Where is he?”

“With Robbie.” She jerked hard on the reins to back the horse faster.

“Roden? Why...what makes you think...Abigail, stop.” He grabbed the reins, halting the horse. “Why do you think he’s with Roden?”

“Get in the buggy. You drive. I’ll tell you on the way to Robbie’s house. We don’t have a lot of time before that storm breaks.” She scrambled into the seat of the small vehicle. “It’s the only thing that makes any sense.”

“You’re not making a lot of sense,” Mathew noted, even as he climbed into the buggy. He threw a glance at the sky, and then slapped the reins over the livery horse’s flanks. “Which way?”

She pointed down the main street. “Turn left at the next street and stay west.”

The horse shied with the next bright flash of lightning and immediate, close crack of thunder. Mathew gripped the reins, keeping firm tension on the frightened gelding to keep it from bolting. “Why do you think Ethan is with Roden?”

“When I was gathering plants this afternoon, Caleb Cantwell—”

“Caleb Cantwell of the rock-throwing hornet incident?” Mathew pulled back on the reins when the horse half-reared in the traces.

Abigail nodded. “He rode down the creek near the Davis’s old place. Said Robbie sent him to find me and that Robbie wanted me to come to his house because he had something of mine, but he would only give it to me if I came to his house.”

“And you think he was referring to Ethan?”

She nodded. “Yes.”

The hair on the back of Mathew’s neck lifted moments before lightning struck the ground less than a hundred feet from them. The horse reared, screaming in fright. He fought the gelding back under control. “We’re going to get killed if we don’t get to Roden’s house soon or under cover.”

“It’s about half a mile.”

By his best estimate, they were half a mile from town, caught between the proverbial rock and a hard place. Mathew reined the

horse hard to the left, slapping the reins again over its flanks to convince the animal to continue moving forward. The gelding plunged in the traces, its gait a mincing half-gallop. Another close lightning strike and Mathew knew the horse would bolt. Even though the rain hadn't started, the lightning and thunder was enough to make keeping the gelding under control difficult. With only one good hand to hold wet, slick reins...he didn't follow that thought to its conclusion. "Is Ethan safe with Roden?"

Abigail twisted on the seat to him. "I don't think Robbie will hurt him, but he has to be scared to death."

Mathew nodded, and the first heavy, icy, drop of rain hit his hand. "Is there any place we can take cover until this blows over?"

Her mouth fell open. She lifted her arm across his chest and pointed at the sky over his shoulder. "Give the horse his head. We have to outrun that."

Mathew twisted around on the seat to view the storm. His chest seized. The leading edge of part of the storm twisted around itself, the different cloud layers as visible as a stack of flapjacks. The upper most clouds were a shade of brilliant icy green he'd never witnessed before, and lightning snaked out of the twisting, churning layers. At the base of the monster, a dust cloud rose in a writhing column toward the sky. "What is that?"

"Tornado. Go, Mathew. Go!"

There was no way they could outrun the beast bearing down on them, but if he ran the horse parallel to the storm, they might be able to skirt the edges to get away from it. He grabbed the long buggy whip and cracked it as hard as he could onto the horse's rump. The gelding took off in a gallop. Mathew continued to crack the whip over the gelding's head without hitting the horse.

He risked a glance at the monster. A twisting, elephantine funnel lowered from the storm, dipping into the writhing dust and wind-flattened grasses. It was close. Too close. A sheet of rain closed around the nightmare, blocking its progression from sight, but the angry hissing howl of the tornado was heard above the pounding of the rain and the roaring of the thunder.

The howling grew louder, and the buggy rocked violently from side to side. Abigail flung herself closer to him and wrapped her arms around his waist. Dirt clods thumped against the leather hood. A piece of grass sliced through the leather as if it was a hot knife through butter. The rain hit like millions of stinging bees. Then it was past them. The rain still fell in great gouts, but the skies lightened with the fading sunset.

Mathew gradually reined the horse to a walk. When he finally brought the gelding to a halt, he slumped in the seat, amazed they

were all still alive. Abigail shook against him as if severely chilled. Even the horse shuddered with each heaving breath.

He glanced at the path the tornado took. It appeared as if the land had been ripped open by a gigantic single-furrow plow that grew wider as it traversed over the grasses. The funnel cloud was no longer visible. Instead, a massive black wedge shape moved relentlessly away from them and toward the town.

“Dear God...” Mathew couldn’t stop the words slipping from him.

“It’s going to hit Brokken.” Her voice caught on the town’s name and a new shudder rippled over her.

“We can’t get ahead of it to warn them.” His stomach sank. People were going to die, and he couldn’t do anything to prevent it. “All we can do is go to Roden’s house, find Ethan, and then go back to town and help anyone hurt.”

Tears rolled down Abigail’s face, but she nodded her agreement. Mathew reminded himself those were her friends and neighbors in the path of that monster. People he considered his neighbors, too, and a few friends. There wasn’t even a devil’s bargain to make this time to try to save one life.

“Hopefully, they’ll hear it coming,” she said, “and get into the storm cellars.”

Mathew wasn’t even sure being in a storm cellar would save anyone. He lifted the reins and shook them. The horse managed a staggering step forward. Mathew immediately reined the gelding to a halt and looked at Abigail. “Which way to Roden’s house? We’re going to have to walk.”

She scanned the landscape and then pointed back toward the tornado. “It’s back that way, at least a mile.”

Mathew climbed down from the buggy and froze. Every visible inch of the leather hood was coated with mud and bristled with pieces of grass like an angry porcupine. How they had managed not to be killed—with grass and mud, no less—was beyond him. He could only imagine what kind of projectiles the tornado would create when it hit a house. Or the town. “Wait in the buggy until I have the horse unhitched. I’ll help you down then.”

Mathew spoke softly to the horse as he ran his hand over the animal’s legs. A cursory exam of the gelding revealed a multitude of scratches and welts. While he knew the horse had been running for its life and theirs, that they were a mile past Roden’s house startled him. Little wonder the animal trembled with exhaustion. He unbuckled the harness and led the gelding out of the traces.

“Is he all right?” Abigail joined him next to the horse.

“Seems to be. I thought I said I’d help you down.”

She wrapped her arms around herself. Her teeth chattered, and she

shivered. "You did. I couldn't sit there because all I can think about is..." She trailed off.

He was startled to see her breath hanging in the air. Muddy water dripped from her hair, rain soaked her clothing, and the winds had torn her braid loose and twisted long pieces of grass into the strands. "Are you all right?"

"I think so. I'm just cold."

Mathew stripped off his frock coat and draped it around her shoulders. "It's going to be dark soon. I'm going to see if there is a lantern in the buggy."

"Sam used to keep a lantern in it." She pulled his coat more tightly around her. "But, I don't know if it's there anymore. Both armies during the war took everything that wasn't nailed down. The only way we stopped them from taking the buggy was by pulling the wheels off it and hiding them in the woods."

"Hold the horse." He held the reins out to her. "I'll go look."

"Mathew."

His name sounded on a small whimper, and he hesitated.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have let Ethan go without me."

Several strands of muddy hair were plastered to her cheeks. He gently brushed them back. "No matter what I said earlier, this isn't your fault. I shouldn't have said it was. I'm sorry."

"I should have gone with Mr. Reed to help keep an eye on the boys."

"Stop, Abby, please." Mathew hesitated again. "Let me see if there's a lantern in the buggy. We'll go find Ethan and then go back to town. There are people who are going to need help."



THE HORSE PLODDED BEHIND them. Abigail carried the lantern and led the way to Roden's house. Though the worst of the storm was long past, heavy rain continued to fall, and the path of the tornado was obvious. With every step, Mathew's heart sank lower and lower. The tornado had traveled this same route.

Before Roden's home came into the lantern light, the destruction became evident. Boards were scattered on the ground, shattered into little more than kindling. What was left of the house appeared to have been smashed by a vengeful giant. Pieces of the building spread out for yards from the original structure.

Mathew jogged a few paces closer. "Ethan!"

Only the pattering of the rain on the demolished structure answered him. No one could have survived this.

"Ethan!"

Abigail stopped next to him and lifted the lamp higher. Mathew

drew a deep breath to call for Ethan again when a low moan from the farthest edge of the debris field caught his attention.

“Over there.” He pointed and together he and Abigail made their way to the edge. Abigail gasped and clamped a hand over her mouth when the lantern light revealed Roden.

A large section of the roof covered him from mid-chest down. A long piece of board had been turned into a deadly projectile by the high wind. It pierced Roden’s arm and embedded itself into a tree, pinning him to the live oak. Still another board protruded through the roof section.

Mathew ran the remaining feet to the unconscious man. Abigail followed him. He knelt next to Roden. “Raise the lamp a little more, Abby.”

She lifted it as high as she could. “Can we lift that part of the roof off him?”

Mathew took the lamp from her and peered under the roof, and then shook his head. He gestured to the board piercing the roof section. “It’s impaled him.”

She turned her head, retching. Mathew set the lantern on the ground. He wanted to shake the man back to consciousness and knew he couldn’t do that.

A low groan broke from Roden, and his eyes fluttered open. “Don’t think...think you can...fix...” An aborted cough brought a bubble of dark blood to Roden’s lips.

“Robert, stay with me. I need you to stay with me.” Mathew grabbed Roden’s free hand. “Stay with me.”

“Abby...tell him...” Another bubble broke on his lips.

Abigail dropped to her knees next to him. “Tell him what, Robbie?”

“You were...were...gonna marry...”

Mathew met her gaze over the dying man and he nodded slightly, whispering, “Tell him anything he wants to hear.”

Her eyes widened, and then she forced a smile and looked down at Roden. She brushed her hand over his brow. “You should have asked me, Robbie.”

Roden’s eyes half-closed. Mathew leaned closer to him. “Where is Ethan, Robert?”

“Stor...” Roden’s eyes opened fully. “Storm...cel...cellar.”

Wanting to do nothing more than bolt to his feet and find Ethan, and knowing if he left Roden would die alone, knifed through Mathew. Every second that passed was a potentially wasted second he could use in a battle to save his son’s life.

Roden’s next breath was shallow and gurgling. A final bubble formed on his lips and broke with the long, sighing breath that

escaped him.

Mathew released Roden's hand and placed it across his unmoving chest. He sucked in a deep breath while he closed the man's unseeing eyes. Abigail rocked back onto her heels, breathing in harsh, short, gasps. Mathew pushed himself to his feet. His son had to be somewhere near.

"I have to find Ethan, even if he's..." He couldn't bring himself to say the rest. Mathew grabbed the lantern. He had no idea what he was even looking for. "Where is it?"

Abigail stood, turning in a circle. "Usually, they're built under the house or in a hillside. There aren't any hills close. It's got to be under the house."

Mathew scanned the landscape, taking in the destruction again. "God help us...what's left of the house buried it."

"No. There are always outside doors in case the house does fall down." She ran to the house and walked slowly around the foundation.

Mathew heard the change in her steps when she crossed what he thought was a section of the wall on the ground.

"Here. Mathew, bring the lantern."

Three long, heavy timbers blocked the access to the cellar. Together, he and Abigail pushed each timber off the doors, and then Mathew pulled them open. He rushed down the earthen steps, Abigail right behind him.

"Ethan!"

Ethan huddled in a far back corner, shuddering. He lifted his head. His face was filthy and streaked with tears. Ethan bolted to his feet and ran to him. Mathew scooped him into his arms, hugging the boy tightly to his chest. Ethan reached over his shoulder.

"Momma," Ethan whispered, straining to reach Abigail. "Don't go."

Abigail's gasp sounded unnaturally loud in the small, dirt room. Mathew turned. She was halfway up the steps, her back to them both. Without letting go of his son, he closed the distance and caught her elbow. He softly repeated Ethan's plea. "Don't go."

Chapter Seventeen

Abigail walked on one side of the horse, Mathew on the other.

They kept a hand on Ethan to keep him from sliding off the horse as he had fallen asleep. His only complaint about the whole ordeal was that Robbie had taken his “great big fish from him,” and he didn’t get any supper.

Dawn tinted the sky with soft pastel pinks and yellows when they approached Brokken. As they drew closer to the west bridge on the far edge of town, the destruction she expected to see wasn’t there.

“Mathew, stop.”

He brought the tired horse to a halt. Abigail stared at the town, wondering if she was seeing an illusion. “It’s all there. It’s all still there.”

“How did it miss the town?” He slid his hand across Ethan’s back to grasp hers.

“It must have turned.” She squeezed Mathew’s hand, glanced at him, and met his gaze. “Maybe, God decided Brokken has been broken enough. Maybe, we’ve all been broken enough.”

She tried to pull her hand free but acquiesced when he gripped her hand with greater force.

“Abby, I don’t want a proxy marriage. Marry me in Grisson’s church. Even if you don’t always agree with him, he’s the only pastor in town.” Mathew looked away briefly, and she followed his line of sight back to Brokken. He continued, his gaze still on the town, “I realized something last night. I want to grow old with you. I want to spend the rest of my life in this broken little town in Texas.”

Abigail looked away from the town washed clean with the downpour and shimmering in the light of a new day. She settled her gaze on Ethan, still in a sound sleep on the broad back of the horse.

Mathew continued to look at the town. “We both have a past that didn’t include each other.”

The first, long rays touched the curls on Ethan’s head, spinning gold from their depths. “I don’t live in the past, Mathew.”

“Only ghosts can.” His fingers tightened again on hers. “She was my wife, and yes, I see a lot of her in Ethan. Just because I see his resemblance to her doesn’t mean I compare you to her. Other than how she died, I’m not sure how much he even remembers about Georgianna. He did make it clear a few hours ago who his mother is.”

Tears stung her eyes when she looked at their joined hands across Ethan’s back.

“Abigail, will you let Grisson marry us again? Will you be wife, my helpmeet, and mother to my son?”



IT TOOK SIX WAGON LOADS to move enough hay bales and long boards to the glen. The bales were set up as both seating areas and as supports for the boards to create tables. Those boards groaned with the food set on them. The only way to stop thinking of this glen as a special place she could only share with Sam was to open it to the whole town and make new memories here.

It wasn't just a wedding, Abigail decided, but a celebration. Brokken had been spared and with the mail-order grooms, had another chance to survive and thrive.

Thomas Reed reined in the horse pulling Sam's old buggy to a halt at the edge of the glen. Abigail scanned the faces turned to her. Everyone in town was here, even old man Fenton. She lifted her gaze to the man waiting for her across the glen. Her breath caught in her throat. Good heavens, he was tall and nothing at all like Victoria had teased her he was.

The warm breeze caught the ends of his silk tie and fluttered them. The half-smile crossing his face when he met her gaze across the distance settled deep in her, filled her with warmth and started butterflies fluttering in her stomach.

Reed gave her a hand from the buggy, and she was met by Ethan. He took her hand into his small one. "I'll walk you to Pa, Momma."

Abigail glanced down at Ethan and then to his father. Mathew's smile softened, and his head dipped in a slight nod. So, this was the surprise Ethan had been almost bursting his buttons to share. "Thank you, Ethan."

Ethan led her up the aisleway created by the hay bales, announcing to the gathered townsfolk, "Me and Pa are marrying Momma."

Even the somber and severe Pastor Grisson smiled with Ethan's announcement. They halted next to Mathew, and Ethan refused to relinquish Abigail's hand. Yancy, Mathew's best man, leaned down to Ethan and said in a loud whisper, "Button, you need to let go of her hand. Your Pa has to put a ring on her finger, and he can't marry her if he doesn't."

Ethan turned his face up to Abigail, clearly doubting Yancy. Abigail smiled and nodded. "Yank's right."

Victoria, wearing a dress for the first time in years, held her hand out to Ethan. She had even forgone wearing her badge and carrying a sidearm. "Come here and stand with me, Ethan."

Once Ethan stood with her maid of honor, Grisson intoned, "Dearly

beloved, we are gathered here today in the sight of God and this company, to unite this man and this woman in holy matrimony..."

"Me, too," Ethan pointed out.

Laughter rippled through the small glen. Grisson smiled and recovered quickly. "To unite as a family this man, this woman, and this child."

As Grisson continued with the ceremony, Abigail tilted her head to Mathew, her gaze skimming his features. Her hand shook when he held it and slid a simple, unadorned gold band onto her finger. After what felt to be an eternity, the ceremony was almost over and Grisson finally said, "It is my honor to present to you, Dr. and Mrs. Knight. Dr. Knight, you may kiss your bride."

Abigail's breath caught in the back of her throat as Mathew leaned closer to her. He slid an arm around her shoulders and tilted her chin with his right hand. He left a lingering kiss on her lips and then whispered in her ear, "How long do we have to stay for the festivities?"

Everyone in the glen had to see the blush on her face as hot as her cheeks felt. She managed to murmur, "Just a little while."

A little while turned into several hours, and the sun was setting when Mathew caught her arm at the elbow. He nudged his head toward the waiting buggy. "Molly and Thomas are keeping Ethan for the night. Let's go home, Mrs. Knight."

Abigail turned fully to him, her hand brushing across his broad chest. "I thought you were never going to suggest that."

Mathew guided her across the glen, nodding at the well-wishes called out. A warm breeze lifted as they passed by a dogwood still holding a few remaining petals. As silent as snowflakes, the petals drifted down across their path and one landed on Mathew's arm. Abigail picked it off his sleeve, hesitating.

Mathew stopped, a brow lifted in a silent query.

Abigail drew a deep breath. "I wanted to be married here for a reason."

"I know. Victoria told me this morning what this little glen meant for you and Sam." He brushed the back of his hand along the slope of her cheek. "I'm honored you wanted to have Grisson marry us here."

She raised the solitary petal into the breeze and let it go. Together they watched it drift upward. It spiraled and swirled across the clearing and then disappeared into the gathering twilight. She softly whispered, "Good-bye, Sam."



THIS IS THE FIRST BOOK of the Brokken Road Romances. Thanks so much for reading.

If you have enjoyed this Brokken Road Romance, please consider leaving a review at [Brokken Knight](#).

Book 2, [Brokken Arrow](#), a Novella, is also available.

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One thing that many readers might be surprised to learn is that the practice of medicine during and immediately after the American Civil War was not as barbaric as is often portrayed in the movies. The use of anesthesia, predominantly the use of chloroform, has been standard practice since the early 1800s. While doctors knew very little of germ theory, Joseph Lister proved in 1865 that using carbolic acid to create a sterile surgical field and to treat open wounds prevented infection, based upon his own experiences and on research by Louis Pasteur.

For every man killed on the battlefield during the American Civil War, two more succumbed to infection, disease, or illness. Dysentery, small pox, and measles killed as many as the minie ball did. If a minie ball struck bone, the bullet would shatter that bone beyond repair and often tear inches of bone away as it exited. Amputation was the only recourse and the only chance a Civil War soldier had of surviving a bullet wound injury to a limb. Amazingly, even without sterile techniques in the battlefield surgery, the odds of surviving an amputation were better than seventy-five percent.

Advances in prosthetics, surgical techniques, hospitalization, and even sanitation all came about because of the dedicated physicians who served both the Union and Confederate forces. The Union Army was the first to create a special designation for a battlefield surgical/hospital area—flying a yellow flag emblazoned with a large, red “H.” The Confederacy soon followed with that designation and there appeared to be an unspoken agreement between both sides to not fire upon the men fighting valiantly to save lives in utterly deplorable conditions.

In *Brokken Knight*, I write of food rations being cut and then cut again for the Confederate prisoners held at Camp Douglas, in Illinois. The Confederacy did not have a monopoly on appalling environments or staggering death rates within the prisoner of war camps. The death rates in Union prisoner camps matched, and in the case of Elmira, New York exceeded, those of their Southern counterparts, including Andersonville, Georgia, and for all the same reasons. Camps routinely held three to four times more prisoners than they had been built to house, and in some camps, ten times more men than they were ever designed to accommodate. At best in the camps, sanitation was poor. Food shortages—especially in the South—were the norm. Medical attention was nonexistent. Combine these factors and it equals an appalling death rate of more than twenty percent for all camps. In the

Northern prisoner of war camps, those shortages in foods and medical care which lead to the horrifying death rates came about as a policy of retribution and through the deliberate actions and non-actions of Lincoln's Secretary of War, Edwin Stanton.

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